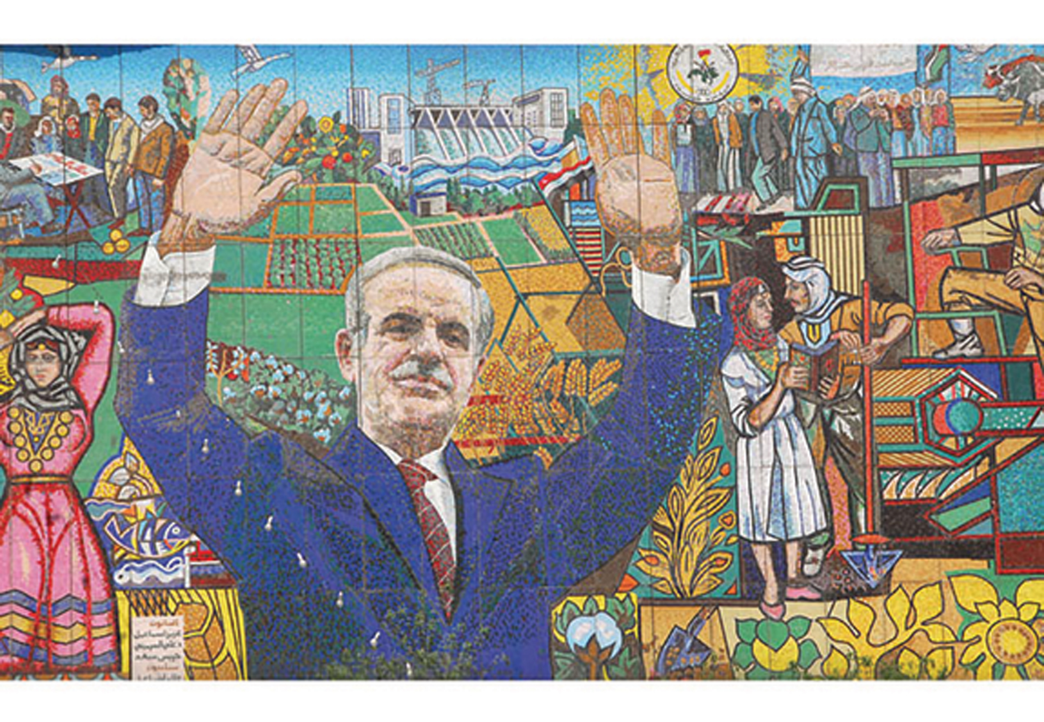
THE ALAWIS OF SYRIA

War, Faith and Politics in the Levant

Michael Kerr · Craig Larkin (eds)



THE ALAWIS OF SYRIA

Urban Conflicts, Divided Societies

Series editors

Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin (both at the Centre for the Study of Divided Societies, Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, King's College London)

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WAR, FAITH AND POLITICS IN THE LEVANT



The Alawis of Syria

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CRAIG LARKIN
(*Editors*)





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Producing a book that examines the contempory experience of the Syrian Alawi community in its historical context was the objective of an international workshop held by the Lebanon and Syria Research Group in the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies at King's College London on 8–9 January 2014. This brought world leading Syria experts and Western diplomats together for a two-day roundtable with the editors. The workshop was funded through the Centre for the Study of Divided Societies by the King's College London Arts & Humanities Research Institute and the British Council. We are extremely greatful for their generous support and the assistance of their staff. We would like to thank Michael Dwyer for his advice, kindness and support and also his colleagues at C. Hurst & Co. Publishers. Special thanks to Lord Michael Williams of Baglan for his contributions at King's during the formative stages of this volume, to colleagues at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and research students at the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies who took part in the workshop.

CONTRIBUTORS

Fabrice Balanche is Assistant Professor at the University of Lyon 2 and Director of the Research Group on the Mediterranean and the Middle East (GREMMO). His main areas of expertise are Syria and Lebanon and since conducting his first fieldwork in the Middle East in 1990 he has spent ten years living in the Levant. In 2006, he published a work on contemporary Syria entitled *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien* (The Alawi region and Syrian power) and in 2012 he published *Atlas du Proche-Orient arabe* (Atlas of the Arab Near East). He is frequently called upon as an expert on the Syrian civil war and water issues in the region.

Aslam Farouk-Alli is a Research Associate at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Centre for Contemporary Islam (CCI). He holds an M.Soc.Sci. in Religious Studies from UCT and an MA in Arabic from the University of South Africa (UNISA). He is the editor and contributing author to *The Future of Palestine and Israel: From Colonial Roots to Postcolonial Realities* (Midrand, South Africa: Institute for Global Dialogue, 2007). He has also translated from the original Arabic an important work by the Egyptian Reformist Scholar, Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, prefaced with a long biographical introduction and published as: *Within the Boundaries of Islam—A Study on Bid'ah* (Kuala Lampur: Islamic Book Trust, 2010). His research interests are Religion and Politics.

Alan George gained degrees in geography from Oxford University (BA) in 1970 and Durham University (MA) in 1972 before completing his PhD on Syria in 1978, also at Durham University. Since 1984 he has worked as a freelance journalist, researcher and expert witness in political asylum cases involving the Middle East. He is a former Head of Research at the Arab-British

Chamber of Commerce and a former Assistant Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (CAABU). His publications include *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003) and *Jordan: Living in the Crossfire* (London: Zed Books, 2005). In 2003–13 he was a Senior Associate Member of St Antony's College, Oxford University and is now a Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies at King's College London.

Leon T. Goldsmith is Assistant Professor in the College of Economics and Political Science at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Dr Goldsmith has been researching the Alawis of the Levant since 2007 and conducted field research in Syria, Lebanon and Southern Turkey in 2009 and 2011. He witnessed the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 in Damascus and in the coastal region where the majority of Alawis live. He is the author of *Cycle of Fear: Syria's Alawites in War and Peace* (London: Hurst, 2015), and he has written articles on Alawi identity in the *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Foreign Affairs* and the Turkish Middle East Studies journal, *Ortadoğu Etütleri*.

Raymond Hinnebusch is Professor of International Relations and Middle East Studies and Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies at the University of St. Andrews. He is editor of the St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syrian Studies. His books on Syria include *Syria, Revolution from Above*, (Routledge, 2000); *The Syrian-Iranian Alliance: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, with A. Ehteshami, (Routledge, 1997); *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process*, with A. Drysdale, (Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991); *Authoritarian Power in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant*, (Westview Press, 1990); and *Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development*, (Westview Press, 1989).

Michael Kerr is Professor of Conflict Studies and Director of the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies at King's College London. He is a graduate of Essex University (BA Hons. Political Science), and the London School of Economics (MSc. Government; PhD International History) where he was Leverhulme Research Fellow in 2007–08. His Middle East research focuses on the Levant and recent books include *Lebanon: After the Cedar Revolution*, eds. with Are Knudsen, (London: Hurst and NY: Oxford University Press, 2012); *Conflict, Diplomacy and Society in Israeli-Lebanese Relations*, eds. with Rory Miller,

(Routledge, 2010), *The Destructors: The Story of Northern Ireland's Lost Peace Process*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), and *Imposing Power-Sharing: Conflict and Coexistence in Northern Ireland and Lebanon*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005).

Craig Larkin is Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, King's College London. He is the Deputy Director of the Centre for Study of Divided Societies and co-head of the Lebanon and Syria Research Group at King's. He holds a PhD in Middle East Studies from the University of Exeter (Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies, 2009), an MA in Criminology & Criminal justice (LLM, 1999) and a BA(Hons) in Law & Politics (LLB, 1998) from Queen's University, Belfast. His recent publications include *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past* (London: Routledge, 2012) and *The Struggle for Jerusalem's Holy Places* (London: Routledge, 2013), co-authored with Pullan, Sternberg, Kyriacou and Dumper.

Raphaël Lefèvre is a Gates Scholar at Cambridge University (King's College) where his current research looks at the way in which local manifestations of Sunni Islamism in Lebanon evolved from the early 1980s until recently. At Cambridge, he is a research associate at the Center for the Study of the International Relations of the Middle East and North Africa (CIRMENA). He is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut where his research looks at dynamics currently taking place within the Islamist sphere in Lebanon and Syria. He is the author of a book on Syrian Islamism entitled *Ashes of Hama: the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (London: Hurst and NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Reinoud Leenders (PhD SOAS) is Reader in International Relations and Middle East Studies in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. His work deals with the political economy of corruption, authoritarian governance, refugee issues, and conflict in the Middle East including Syria. He recently authored *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State Building in Post-War Lebanon* (Cornell University Press, 2012) and co-edited (with Steven Heydemann) *Middle East Authoritarianism: Governance, Contestation and regime Resilience in Syria and Iran* (Stanford University Press, 2013). He formerly worked for the International Crisis Group based in Beirut and at the University of Amsterdam.

Aron Lund is a Swedish journalist and editorialist specialising in Middle Eastern and North African affairs, with an MA in Arabic and Oriental Studies from Uppsala University. He is editor of 'Syria in Crisis' (carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis) at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and has published extensively on Syria's opposition movements, militias and military. In addition to being a regular contributor to various journals and newspapers, Lund has published three books, *Drömmen om Damaskus*—'The Dream of Damascus' (SILC Förlag, 2010)', *Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions* (FEPS/Olof Palme International Center, Brussels, 2012) and *Syrien brinner: Hur revolutionen mot Assad blev ett inbördeskrig—'Syria Burning: How the Revolution Against Assad Turned into a Civil War'* (Silc Förlag, Stockholm, 2014).

Olivia Midha is an independent researcher based between Beirut and London. Fluent in Arabic, French and Farsi, she graduated from Oxford in 2012 with a degree in Oriental Studies and a Masters Degree in Conflict Resolution from Kings College London in 2013. She has previously worked as an advisor and consultant on issues of security and strategy in the Middle East, focusing particularly on the Alawi communities of Lebanon and Syria.

Max Weiss is Associate Professor of History and Near Eastern Studies and Elias Boudinot Bicentennial Preceptor at Princeton University. He is the author of *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi'ism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), and the translator, most recently, of Nihad Sirees, *The Silence and the Roar* (London: Pushkin Press, 2013). He is currently writing an interpretive history of Syria in the twentieth century, to be published by Princeton University Press, and translating Mamdouh Azzam, Ascension to Death. Ph.D. Stanford University.

Carsten Wieland PhD is a diplomat in the German Foreign Office. Before joining the ministry he worked as a political analyst, historian, journalist and conflict expert. He has worked and lived in Syria several times since 1999 and speaks Arabic. His most recent monograph is *Syria—A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring* (Cune Press, 2012). He has written articles and books on nationalism, ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and South Asia, on Islamism and secularism in Syria and the Middle East. Until 2011 he headed the corporate communication department of the German Press Agency (DPA).

Stefan Winter is Professor of Middle East History at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) specialising in the history of Shi'ism. He holds a Master's degree in political science from the University of Erlangen, where he submitted a thesis on the religious legitimisation of the Hafez al-Asad regime, as well as a PhD in history from the University of Chicago. His book *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2010. Stefan spent numerous years living in Syria, most recently while on sabbatical leave in Aleppo in 2011, where he was witness to the beginning of the revolt. He is currently completing a history of the Alawi community from the medieval through the Ottoman and French mandate period, to be published by Princeton University Press in 2016.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration from Arabic and Turkish follows the format of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. *Hamza* is rendered with', '*ayn* with ', however no note is made of the difference between long and short vowels and no diacritical marks will appear in this volume, except when they are used in original texts or sources. For practical reasons, well-known names and popular terms follow the most conventional spelling (e.g. Shi'a).

Throughout the book the term Alawi has been favoured, except in quotations where its variant Alawite or French spelling has been used. This is an editorial choice following a trend in Arabic literature to take the Arabic *nisba* adjective for the name of the sect, also reflecting the shift over time from Sunnite to Sunni and from Shiite to Shi'a. Although the term Alawi in Arabic begins with the letter '*ayn*, the frequency with which this term occurs throughout this book suggestes that the term be Anglicised and appear without the '*ayn* except in areas where texts originally containing the '*ayn* have been quoted.

Transliterations of certain names have been standardised: Asad (rather than Assad), Hizballah (rather than Hezbollah, Hizbullah), Ba'ath (rather than Ba'th), al-Qaeda (rather than al-Qaida).

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INTRODUCTION

FOR 'GOD, SYRIA, BASHAR AND NOTHING ELSE'?

Michael Kerr

Reflecting on his travels in the Middle East during the mid-nineteenth century, Protestant missionary William Thompson commented that:

> The Sunnites excommunicate the Shiites—both hate the Druse, and all three detest the Nusairiyeh.... There is no common bond of union. Society has no continuous strata underlying it, which can be opened and worked for the general benefit of all, but an endless number of dislocated fragments, faults, and dikes, by which the masses are tilted up in hopeless confusion, and lie at every conceivable angle of antagonism to each other.[1]

Thompson's perennial sectarian depiction of the Levant endures. Not long after the Arab uprisings of 2010–11 occured, the Nusayri, as the Alawi community were known up until the post-Ottoman period, and Syria's disenfranchised Sunni majority were locked in an intractable civil war. From the outset of this zero-sum conflict, Syria's Alawi led government viewed it as the culmination of a 'Western siege' that waxed and waned during former US President George W. Bush's tenure. By 2014–15, the foreign-backed opposition to the Syrian regime was dominated by radical jihadi offshoots of al-Qaeda who sought to carve out a state from the Sunni hinterlands of what was Ba'athist Syria and Iraq. This resulted in Western intervention; not to bring about regime change, but to halt a jihadist offensive. Yet viewing the war for Syria

primarily through the lens of either third party intervention or sectarianism distorts the complexity of the Alawi community's contemporary experience and its diverging responses to it.

The uprising in Syria that led to civil war began in the small town of Dar'a near the Jordanian border in March 2011, when state security forces reacted violently towards peaceful anti-government protests, firing upon and killing civilians.[2] Representing an outpouring of nationalist discontent towards President Bashar al-Asad's government from all sections of society, demonstrations quickly spread to Syria's larger towns and cities, morphing into an armed insurgency. At the time of writing, the struggle for Syria has devastated much of the country and its cities, resulted in over 200,000 deaths, left millions internally displaced, and created millions of refugees.[3]

In its bid for survival, the Syrian regime aggressively rallied the Alawi community behind it, while the conflict more generally became a textbook case of what sociologists call sectarian and ethnic 'boundary activation'—the heightening of awareness of perceived differences between members of the in-group and the out-group.[4] Little has been written about the Alawi community of the Levant[5] to appreciate and understand what 'boundaries', actually, are being activated in Syria's civil war. It is not clear what Alawi identity markers are assumed to resonate effectively among the community's members for the regime to appeal to them in its vicious campaign to preserve power at all costs. Addressing these issues in great depth, this book sets out to fill the gap in our knowledge of Syrian politics and society and, by extension, regime-Alawi relations, the flexible and changing nature of Alawi identities, and the role played by the Alawi community in opposition and pro-government organisations during the first years of the civil war. Leading Syria experts present new perspectives on contemporary Alawi history, politics and sociology, analysing the Syrian state system, its political economy and governing elites, and the Alawi community's differing responses to the civil war which, to a large extent, have been overshadowed by the regime's focus on linking this community's fate to its own survival. Placing the contemporary Alawi experience in its historical context, this volume offers readings of its journey from rural obscurity in late Ottoman times, political autonomy under the French Mandate system, migration and socio-economic development in independent Syria, the assumption of political supremacy under the leadership of former President Hafez al-Asad and his efforts to consolidate a secular Arab nationalist state, the unravelling of this state in the context of the recent Arab uprisings, and President Bashar al-Asad's approach to the early years of Syria's civil war. By means of an introduc-

tion this section examines some of the principal themes addressed in detail and in depth by the contributors to this volume, highlights the formative points in the Alawi community's twentieth century experience in Syria, and analyses the challenges that both Asad regimes faced in their struggle to maintain power.

The Alawis of Syria

For the Alawis, a largely secular community that has survived in the Middle East for over a millennium, religion represents the most salient cultural marker differentiating it from Syria's Sunni Muslim majority. Descendants of the followers of Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, a disciple who split from the Shi'a branch of Islam in the ninth century, the Nusayri were a mystical heterodox sect originating from Iraq and settling in Syria. The term Nusayri came to hold negative connotations for the community in the Levant. Thus, in modern times, it adopted the name Alawi, meaning followers of Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin, and for Shi'a Muslims his righteous successor. The Alawis account for around twelve percent of Syria's population. They represent a majority in the coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus, bordering Turkey and Lebanon respectively and, through waves of migration in the second half of the twentieth century, came to settle in the cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Hama and Homs (see Fabrice Balanche and Leon Goldsmith, Chapters 4 and 7).

In contemporary Syria, the practice of religion was not of great significance to the Alawi community and certainly not openly so. In fact, while keeping their religion secret, the Alawis displayed a considerable degree of cultural dexterity and social malleability—from gaining autonomy through the establishment of the State of Alawis under the French Mandate (see Max Weiss, Chapter 3) to the political control embroidered into every level of society by Hafez al-Asad during the years of Syrian Ba'ath Party dominance (see Raymond Hinnebusch, Chapter 5). Being Alawi was more of a communal cultural symbol than a deeply religious phenomenon, certainly when compared with the experience of the region's Christian and Muslim communities. Contemporary Alawi identity is by and large a function of the contested nature of Syria's deeply divided society, influenced by those opponents of the Asad regime who have tended to frame their challenge to it in terms of communal identity. The most notable pre-civil war example of this contest is Hafez al-Asad's decision in 1982 to militarily end a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood led insurgency in Hama (see Raphaël Lefèvre, Chapter 6).[6] And in contrast to

many of its opponents during the Syrian civil war, Asad and his supporters did not articulate their position with reference to religious doctrine.

Prior to the civil war, an openly Alawi-centric identity was not promoted by the state nor was the community mobilised on this basis. The opposite was the case: an integral part of the fabric of Alawi identity was self-conscious protectionism and consequently the community displayed an innate desire to promote a secular Syrian society and integrate within it. This process was advanced and engrained through clientelist social networks controlled by Alawi patrons from whom the community benefited under Ba'ath Party rule. Secrecy remained an intrinsic part of Alawi identity and socialisation—social networks operated covertly, promoting Alawis to positions of responsibility within the army, the state bureaucracy and the Ba'ath Party.

Paradoxically, over the last decade, and more so since the civil war began, religious cultural symbolism differentiating the Alawis from other communities played an increasingly salient role in maintaining *'asabiyya*—group or tribal solidarity[7] (see Leon Goldsmith, Chapter 7). For example, prior to the uprising, undertaking the Alawi ceremony of 'initiation' took a number of years to complete. This communal confirmation process represented a special spiritual social journey, but it was certainly not universally practised. When the civil war broke out however, Alawi 'initiation' became a rite of passage for young men joining the pro-state *Shabiha* militias, which acted in an auxiliary capacity to government forces (see Aron Lund, Chapter 10). Therefore, the political function of 'initiation' altered and came to represent a communal rather than a religious awakening; an ethnic marker that developed partly in response to the radicalisation of the Sunni-led opposition movement.

Alawi initiation conducted by a local sheikh or guardian was synonymous with social mobilisation. Initiates were introduced to a wide Alawi social network through which they identified with their community for what it was but also for what it was not, and this relates fundamentally to how they interacted with the Sunni majority. So the primary political function of religion for the Alawi community was communal identification; being Alawi in contemporary Syria meant being part of a network that facilitated social mobility, political opportunity and economic advancement. This had negative social consequences, as many of the regime's opponents held deep-seated political and socio-economic grievances against the Alawi. Often these animosities were class-based rather than religious. Yet, as in any deeply divided society characterised by ethnic or religious schisms, these were felt and articulated through Syria's sectarian cleavages and, in recent times, activated by the Syrian uprising and the regime's violent response to it.

Mindful of the recent experiences of civil war in Iraq and Lebanon, each Syrian community harboured fears that the state to which it formed a composite part might collapse were it to openly oppose the regime. This is a very significant factor in accounting for regime resilience and, in particular, its ability to maintain a high degree of Alawi solidarity. Given the prominent role that sectarian discourse played in both the regime's civil war narrative and that of the radical Islamist opposition, one could be forgiven for assuming that religion was of particular significance to the Alawi community. For Syria's non-Sunni groups however, the conflict was communitarian rather than religious, yet the existential fears they held in common were inculcated by the actions and the rhetoric of both the regime and those groups seeking to carve out an Islamist state in the Levant.

Sectarian identity became a primary driver in the civil war but this was not the case at the beginning of the uprising. The regime cleverly manipulated this variable in its drive to maintain Alawi *'asabiyya*[8] and the support of other minority communities. Jihadist claims to legitimacy and statehood in the Levant are derivative, their religious cause premised upon the credence of a puritanical doctrine, and their contemporary warfare waged in the name of monotheistic devotion. Behind this façade is a state-building project that is ethno-national in its Sunni Arab foundations—these forces are seeking to carve out a state in Syria and Iraq at the expense of those who disenfranchised the Sunni community in these two countries. Taking the ascendancy of such groups in 2012 (when Jabhat al-Nusra first emerged) as a point of departure in Syria's civil war, by 2014 Alawi solidarity appeared complete.

Hafez al-Asad went to great lengths to ensure that the Syrian political system he developed was not viewed *primarily* as a façade for Alawi minority rule. Nevertheless, this was exactly how many of those mobilising the majority community against Bashar al-Asad's more overtly Alawi regime viewed the system, and this can be seen in the polemical sectarian anti-Alawi Islamist imagery used, with chants of 'Asad, we will bring you down, and then we will come next for the Alawites!', and groups praising the killing of Alawi whom they depicted as 'allies of Satan and Iran'.[9] Moreover, by labelling the armed opposition groups 'terrorists', 'jihadi' and 'takfiri', and falling back on the powerful pro-Iranian Lebanese Shi'a militia Hizballah for military support in Syria, Bashar al-Asad took a strategic decision to facilitate sectarian narratives and counter-narratives. He ignored the legitimate socio-economic and political grievances of Syrian protesters and, perhaps intentionally, exposed his community to the reductionist logic of the most extreme Islamist forces.

Consequently, their mutually reinforcing propaganda drowned out the secular opposition discourse of the Syrian National Council (see Carsten Wieland, Chapter 11), which included Alawis, and that of the Muslim Brotherhood, while the prevalence of ISIS and al-Nusra Front in 2014 saw the West switch track and abandon its commitment to regime change in favour of halting the jihadist advance.

The question of whether the Alawi are in fact an orthodox or legitimate Muslim community remains contentious. Despite efforts by Hafez al-Asad to resolve this issue, radical Sunni Islamist groups challenging the regime continue to view the Alawis and the region's other religious communities as heretics. While Bashar al-Asad attempted *Sunnification* through marriage, the building of Salafi mosques, Saudi largesse, and by bringing the Sunni clergy into the political fold,[10] under Hafez al-Asad the Alawi community experienced a process of *Shi'aisation*. Hafez al-Asad purposefully shifted his community closer to mainstream Shi'a Islam, increasingly so as Syria's strategic relationship with revolutionary Iran consolidated in the post-Cold War period. This may have bought the Alawi community a greater degree of Islamic credibility in some parts of the Muslim world, but it deepened the regime's reliance on Iran and placed it squarely on one side of the Sunni–Shi'a divide in the eyes of many within Syria's majority community.

In contemporary Syria, the mystical sheikhs of the Alawi religion were peripheral figures; they were not the state builders of Wahhabist Saudi Arabia or the ayatollahs of revolutionary Iran, nor were they remotely akin to the Shi'a ideologues of Hizballah or the Sunni fanatics of al-Qaeda and ISIS. Paradoxically, the Alawi community has experienced a process of 're-Alawisation' over the last decade, as did the Alawi communities in Lebanon and Turkey (see Craig Larkin and Olivia Midha, Chapter 9). Pilgrimages to religious cities and places where religious figures are buried in the Alawi mountains (see Fig. 0.2) gained in popularity and the re-appropriation of religious symbols and their display was evident, in new contexts and with new meanings. These trends were partly a reaction to what became a Sunni Islamist-led insurgency against the regime and, in effect, the Alawi community, despite the efforts of prominent Alawis in the opposition to steer the community away from the regime (see Carsten Wieland, Chapter 11), and moderate Islamist and secular opposition leaders to unite and overthrow it (see Raphaël Lefèvre, Chapter 6).

Exclusive and preserved by a group of elders, similar in many ways to the Druze community of the Levant, by necessity religion was always a secret affair for the Alawis. There is no mosque that the community could regularly

attend, no central authority shaping and influencing social or moral discourse, and very little ceremony displaying the history and high culture of the religion. In the twentieth century, theological indoctrination was not a central component to the identity-forming narratives of Syrian Alawis. Their socialisation experience and social mobilisation processes were communitarian. Furthermore, one cannot catalogue, connect and affirm the Alawi community's historical trajectory or its ancient doctrinal religious and tribal identities neatly with either the struggle for Syria today or its part in it.

The Alawi community remains bound by existential fears regarding its place in a post-Asad Syria and during the civil war the regime played upon these fears, driving a wedge between it and the Sunni population. Throughout the crisis, there were less notable defections from the Syrian Army, government or state bureaucracy than the opposition had hoped for and, while fear of reprisal was a significant motivating factor, this illustrates how deeply these currents run. At the outset, moderate opposition discourse fell back on the cohesive myth that Syria was a unified nation: there was no sectarian conflict; there was no discord between Syria's different religious and ethnic communities; and not only would a post-Asad Syria remain nationalist, secular and integrated, it would become a democracy. Given the evident expression of Syrian nationalism during the 2011 uprising, the opposition movement initially gained traction, convincing many that not only was the regime's collapse imminent, but that moderate political forces existed within Syrian civil society to replace and better it. It was not long after violent conflict erupted however, that confessional identity became the lowest common denominator in the relationship between the individual and the Syrian state. Despite great displays of Syrian nationalism, once the regime retreated from the Kurdish areas in the north-east of the country and the conflict engulfed Homs and Aleppo, the incompleteness of the Syrian nation was exposed, its communal, tribal and ethnic divisions were exacerbated, and the sum of all its parts began to scatter and fragment.

Lacking robust Western support, when the secular opposition was pared back and the constitutional certainly that the regime provided was challenged by a revanchist Islamist threat, enough Syrians, despite Asad's deep unpopularity and his regime's evident vulnerability, either out of loyalty, fear, or both, looked to him as the lesser of two evils. The regime's supporters began to argue that they were fighting to preserve a nationalist and secular state against a foreign-backed sectarian throwback force. The position they took was simple: unless the regime remained steadfast, Sunni Islamists would overthrow the state, invoke Ibn Taymiyya's *fatwa* against the Nusayri,[11] ethnically cleanse

minority communities that were unwilling to convert to Islam, and establish a radical Islamist state.

Not only did militiant Islamists hobble their secular rivals in 2014, the Syrian National Council's Western supporters came to be more concerned with who was going to contain and defeat the Islamists than they were about who was going to topple Asad. That the regime initially facilitated the development of radical jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq by releasing them from prison is merely one example of the lengths to which it was prepared to go in order to survive (see Reinoud Leenders, Chapter 12). It was an effective tactic, for only a couple of years after the civil war broke out rival apocalyptic sectarian narratives became self-fulfilling prophecies. In September 2013, the BBC's Jeremy Bowen witnessed the Syrian Army and pro-government defence forces fighting to retake the ancient Christian town of Maaloula from opposition groups that included Jabhat al-Nusra. Pro-Asad Christian loyalists defending the town claimed that the West were 'backing the wrong side and should help them to fight jihadist rebels'. One man told Bowen to 'tell the EU and the Americans that we sent St Paul two thousand years ago to take you from the darkness and you sent us terrorists to kill us'.[12]

The state that Hafez built

The Syrian state that France created after 1920 through its interpretation of the League of Nations Mandate system was a heterogeneous unintegrated territory comprising various Ottoman *vilayets* (see Stefan Winter, Chapter 2). Syria's Arab Sunni community represented a majority of the population: the Alawis accounting for eleven percent, the various Christian communities fourteen percent, the Druze community three percent,[13] and Sunni Kurds approximately fourteen percent. Under the mandate (see Max Weiss, Chapter 3), the Alawi community was granted political, social and economic privileges that were unavailable to it in Ottoman times. Notably, the French recruited Alawis into the army in efforts to keep what they hoped would be a reliable minority group apart from the growing Arab nationalist movement. Syria gained full independence in 1946 and by the time its democratically elected government was overthrown by the army three years later, Alawis had assumed positions of significance in the military (see Aslam Farouk-Alli, Chapter 1).

French imperialism in the Levant did not go unchallenged. A Druze protest against the colonial power sparked a nationalist uprising—the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925—after the provinces of Damascus and Aleppo merged to

become the State of Syria, from which the State of Alawis and Greater Lebanon remained apart, and the Alawi territory was not fully integrated with the rest of Syria until after World War II broke out.[14] This was not the first backlash against French rule however, Shaykh Salih al-Ali, a prominent Alawi from Tartus, led an uprising in 1919 against French plans to partition the Syrian coast from the interior.

Resisting Arab nationalism in the Levant, the French made no effort to craft a Jacobin republic in Syria. In fact, the manipulation of confessional identities was instrumental to French control over the region. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, France created Greater Lebanon before moving north to bring the Alawi mountains under control (see Max Weiss, Chap-



Fig. 0.1: Map of Syria

ter 3). As a foil to Sunni hegemony, the French then divided Syria into different cantons or what can be viewed as a confessional federation of its Alawi, Druze and Sunni communities. In 1920, the autonomous State of Alawis was created around the predominantly Sunni port city of Latakia, and this encompassed its rural mountainous hinterland where the Alawis were most populous (see Leon Goldsmith, Chapter 7). In contrast to Christian and Sunni Arab nationalists demanding Syrian unity, many Alawis preferred the political autonomy that French rule bequeathed alongside the multi-confessional state of Greater Lebanon on the Mediterranean coast.[15] By 1946, the Alawi community's growth and development had not served to alleviate existing intercommunal tensions with its neighbours: in Ottoman times the Alawis were despised by the Sunnis for their heresy and poverty; in independent Syria they were despised for their disloyalty to the political ideals of Greater Syria and Arab nationalism, and this was a lesson that Hafez al-Asad never forgot.

The French decampment from Syria did not bring stability to the country: the military became deeply involved in politics and after suffering defeat in the 1948 Arab–Israeli War Syria's post-independence period was marked by a series of military coups and the failure of its parliamentary institutions. An army leader who rose to prominence under the French, Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, dominated Syrian politics from 1949 to 1954 and was largely responsible for unifying the state and doing away with Syria's old system of communal representation through local notables. Forced from government in 1954, his departure marked a return to power of those notables and the rise of ideological parties in Syria. Constituted in 1947, the Ba'ath Party became the most important of these. The decision to merge politically with Egypt as the United Arab Republic in 1958 allayed the military's fear of being overthrown by communists, but it delivered Syria briefly into the hands of President Gamal Abdel Nasser who was not accustomed to sharing power.

By the 1960s, Alawi elites were well placed to exert considerable influence in society through the dominance they attained in Syria's military and government agencies. One such figure was Hafez al-Asad. He was born in the Alawi State in 1930, in Qurdaha, a small rural village not far from Latakia on the Mediterranean coast just north of the Alawi mountains. His father fought against the French and his Alawi religious and tribal origins were of great significance during his political career, as was the legacy of French colonialism in the Levant and the division of its lands along confessional lines. Hafez al-Asad set out to harness Syria's heterogeneous population around a coherent authoritarian centre by building a state that was secular, Arab nationalist and

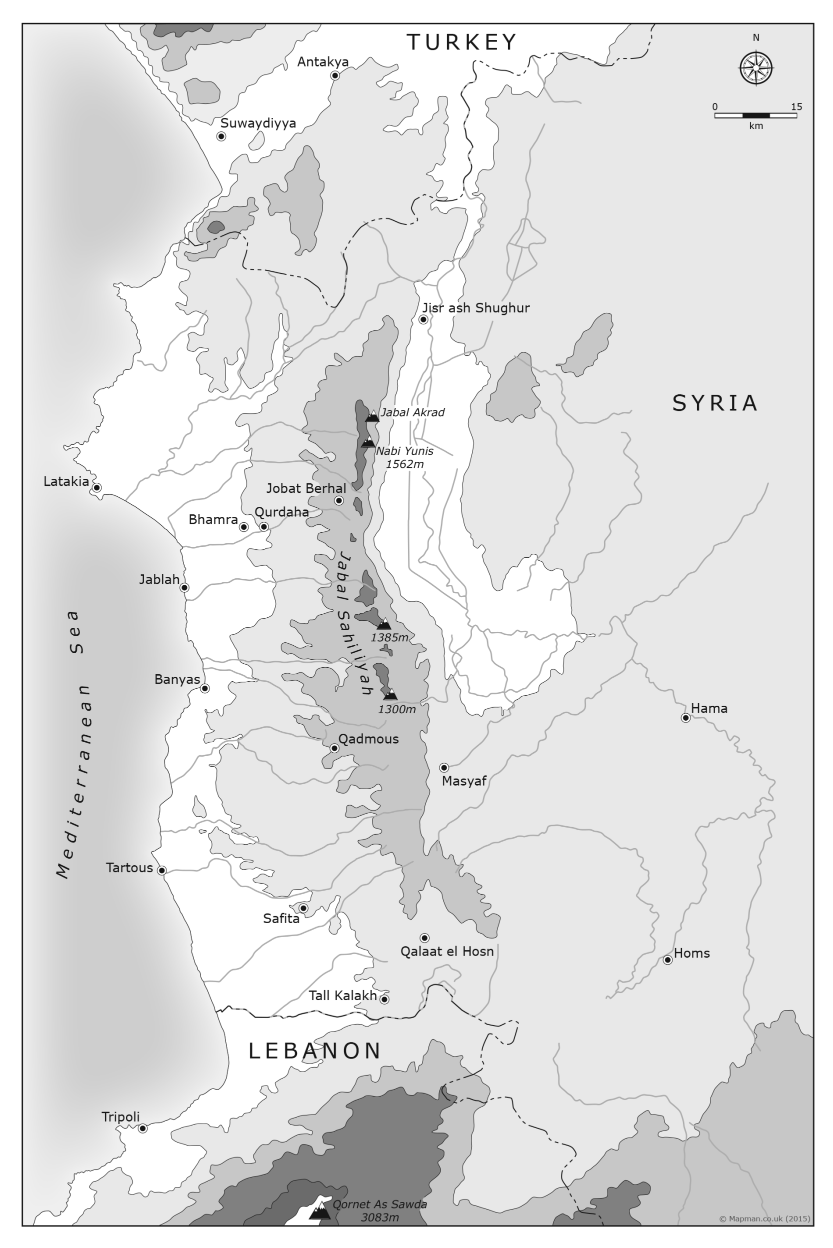


Fig. 0.2: The Alawi mountains of Syria

integrationist, comprising all segments of society that posed no religious or nationalist ideological threat to his rule.

The Syria that Hafez al-Asad grew up in was an unstable *coup*-prone state in which no government lasted very long; ensuring that it became *coup*-proof was central to his plans for state consolidation. The mountain-dwelling Alawi community from which he descended were socially and economically backward when compared to Syria's urban Sunni and Christian communities, and the Alawi gains made under French rule were not consolidated until after he became the country's first non-Sunni president. An Arab nationalist, Hafez al-Asad never accepted the partition of Syria; he viewed the establishment of Lebanon as a colonial mechanism for the division of the Syrian people, weakening their claim to full independence and stifling pan-Arab goals.[16]

Before serving as minister of defence during the disastrous Six Day War with Israel, Hafez al-Asad rose through the ranks of the Syrian Air Force and played a role in the 1963 *coup d'état* that established Ba'ath Party rule in Syria. Between 1963 and 1970 there was a shift in power from the Sunni majority community to Syria's minority communities and of them most notably the Alawis. Having seized power from his principal rival, Salah Jadid, in an internal Ba'ath Party *coup* in 1970 he led Syria until his death in 2000.

Syria's humbling defeat to Israel in 1967 had a profound impression on Hafez al-Asad and it was formative in the development of the pragmatic and ruthless statesmanship for which he and Syria became renowned. The foreign policy maxim: 'you cannot make war in the Middle East without Egypt and you cannot make peace without Syria' was born out of former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's efforts to draw Hafez al-Asad into the Middle East peace process in the mid-1970s—a strategic power play that saw the Syrian leader further his state's irredentist claim to Lebanon by occupying the country in 1976.[17]

Hafez al-Asad was one of the contemporary Middle East's most striking authoritarian leaders and he came to wield absolute power in Syria. His rule through the Syrian Ba'ath Party was not simply a façade for an Alawi state, nor did he preside over a minority regime that governed through the complete exclusion of the majority community from office. However, he consolidated his authority by de-radicalising the Ba'ath Party, absorbing many of its powers into the office of the presidency, and reorganising Syria's army, intelligence services and security apparatus to bring each firmly under Alawi control (see Raymond Hinnebusch, Chapter 5).[18] Domestically, the network of Alawi loyalists he established across the governing party and the security services was pivotal to

his success in transforming what had been a weak penetrated state into a robust regional power of significance. Marking an important distinction between his regime and that of his son Bashar, Hafez al-Asad carefully co-opted key figures from Syria's Sunni community into government, such as Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam and Defence Chief Mustafa Tlass, regime stalwarts who remained in office throughout the course of his presidency.

Central to Syrian state consolidation was Asad's determination to assume the mantle of Arab nationalist leadership when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat entered a peace process with Israel following the 1973 Arab–Israeli war. This shift in Arab politics gave the Syrian Ba'ath Party an enormous legitimacy boost and enabled it to recover from its catastrophic performance in 1967. Lacking a natural consistency among the majority community, Hafez al-Asad fashioned his Arab nationalist credentials out of a personality cult forged through the state-controlled media, and by maintaining Syria's 'resistance' status: confronting the US and Israel as a Soviet ally during the Cold War; rejecting peace with Israel to sustain the Arab–Israeli conflict; dominating Lebanon and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation; siding with the US against Iraq, and then aligning Syria with anti-Western revolutionary Iran in the post-Cold War period. He was most successful in maximising Syria's often narrow negotiating position in international relations and consolidating a state with meagre natural recourses, few allies, and an abundance of enemies in the regional and international state systems.

If the presidency, the army and the Ba'ath Party were the key pillars of government supporting Hafez al-Asad's authoritarian rule, then greater Syrian nationalism was the syncretistic identity of the state that bound it together—a rubric encompassing confessional, ethnic and tribal loyalties. Like Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, Hafez al-Asad repressed ethnic and religious identities under a pan-nationalist umbrella; a state ideology from which the governing party derived its legitimacy. Although Syria became dependent on the doctrine of Ba'athism, the Alawi community remained at the forefront of every aspect of its political and social development. Acutely aware of the resultant legitimacy deficit that this carried, Hafez al-Asad placed the state at the front line of the Arab–Israeli conflict and consolidated his authority through his increasing centrality to regional politics after Egypt established a lasting peace with Israel in the late 1970s. Hafez al-Asad never attained the domestic or international legitimacy that Tito enjoyed, nor could he resolve the fact that he was overly dependent on the support of the Alawi community in a truncated Syrian state which many nationalist and Islamist ideologues

viewed as an artificial colonial construct. Principally, Hafez al-Asad's legitimacy deficit was due to his reliance on the Alawi community. Nevertheless, by the 1990s, Syria appeared to be a more durable and coherent state than at any point since independence.

The state that Hafez al-Asad built consolidated upon the foundations of greater Syrian nationalism and, despite its deficiencies, the nationalist outpouring displayed on the streets at the start of the 2011 uprising was a mark of how successful his presidency had been and a testament to the state's coercive power. In the decade before Tito's death, Slovenes, Croats and Bosnics came to identify less and less with the Yugoslav state. During Bashar al-Asad's first ten years in power it was the government and not the Syrian state that lacked widespread public support. In contrast to the collapse of Yugoslavia, Syria's disintegration was not the result of ethno-national forces encroaching upon a weakened central authority. The disintegration of Syria occurred against the grain of both regime and Syrian opposition efforts to control the state as a whole.

Similar to Ba'athist Iraq, Syria under Hafez al-Asad was always dependent on an authoritarian centre, susceptible to accusations of minority rule, vulnerable to the divisions manipulated by the British and the French, and dependent on a confrontational foreign policy for its survival. When the French unified the country, support for and identification with Arabism and religious communal affiliations were far more evident among the population than any attachment to the idea of a 'Syrian nation'. The manipulation of sub-state identities through the Ba'ath Party, Alawi solidarity and the failure of pan-Arabism were instrumental to Syrian state consolidation under Hafez al-Asad (see Raymond Hinnebusch, Chapter 5). So successful was he in this endeavour that it is ironic that the country collapsed into civil war in 2011: Syria was a far more integrated society than when he came to power; a distinctly Arab Syrian identity existed; and the vast majority of people viewed themselves as Syrian—something which could not be said similarly of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003. Nevertheless, given its increasing legitimacy deficit and continued alignment with revolutionary Iran in the post-Cold War period, it was not at all surprising that the post-2011 struggle for Syria pitted the state that Hafez al-Asad built against a plethora of domestic, regional and international adversaries.

Perhaps civil war over Syria was not inevitable, but cracks were clearly evident in the resistance state that Hafez al-Asad so carefully crafted some time before the uprising. In 2005, Syria's vulnerability was exposed on the interna-

tional stage when Bashar suffered a humiliating reversal of fortunes in Lebanon. The Syrian military forces occuping its fragile neighbour since 1976 were forced to withdraw after Lebanon's Saudi-backed Sunni Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was spectacularly assassinated in a Beirut car bombing.[19] Intense Western pressure and an anti-Syrian uprising brought an abrupt end to the Asad regime's hegemonic control over Lebanon. This significantly weakened Syria's regional standing: for Hafez al-Asad Lebanon was the trump card in Syria's Middle East foreign policy; for Bashar defeat in Lebanon marked a considerable loss of military prestige, irrevocably damaging his father's greater Syrian nationalist state-building project.

Western pressure on the Asad regime intensified over the next two years. Deemed a rogue state by the Bush Administration, the US pointed the finger of blame for Hariri's murder at Damascus and accused Bashar of supporting the anti-Western insurgency in Iraq by allowing Salafi jihadists to cross the Syrian border. This pressure was alleviated in 2007, when US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi met with Bashar al-Asad in Damascus, signalling an end to the diplomatic isolation Syria experienced after the al-Qaeda attacks in the US.[20] In early 2011, in what turned out to be an ill-timed move, the US posted its first ambassador for five years to Damascus,[21] but after anti-government protests began in Dar'a US President Barak Obama renewed sanctions imposed by his predecessor in 2004, signalling an end to the West's short-lived rapprochement with the Asads of Syria.[22]

The Asad state unravels

When anti-authoritarian protests swept the region in 2010–11, it was class-based socio-economic grievances that fuelled domestic Syrian opposition towards a regime that was viewed as overtly Alawi, ostentatiously corrupt and brutally authoritarian. From the outset of the uprising, Bashar al-Asad had no credible political reform agenda with which to contain or regulate what represented the most threatening domestic crisis the regime had faced since the early 1980s. His failure to signicantly advance the Syrian state-building project and the country's descent into civil war was in part a consequence of his inability to emulate his father's foreign policy successes. Equally importantly, where Hafez al-Asad governed with the support of the Ba'ath Party and with the army's backing wielded absolute power through the office of the presidency, Bashar al-Asad's efforts to consolidate his political authority against the conservative old guard of his father's court led him to fall back upon coercion and

Alawi solidarity. Internally, the façade of Syrian political pluralism collapsed in the years after he took office; the Ba'ath Party's significance waned and the regime tapered toward an Alawi familial, tribal and communitarian base. Tellingly, by 2005, he had disposed of the most prominent Sunni linchpins of his father's government,[23] replacing them with a new generation of Alawi loyalists, and this may in fact partly explain the resilience and cohesion that the regime displayed during the early years of the civil war.

In the absence of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, it is highly unlikely that the 2011 protests in Syria would have on their own sparked a revolutionary movement and a civil war that resulted in state fragmentation. Had Bashar al-Asad empowered the bourgeois elites of Aleppo and Damascus after the international siege was lifted in 2007–08, and opened up the system to some form of political pluralism, then the opposition might have gained a stake in the regime and consolidated some of its interests to it. After the period of intense debate over political reform that followed the death of Hafez al-Asad, known as the Damascus Spring (2000–01), his son certainly considered the possibility of limited political reform. When threatened by hardliners from his father's court however, he chose to suppress rather than accommodate calls for political and social change (see Carsten Wieland, Chapter 11).[24] Having subsequently removed these leaders from office and resorted to consolidating power through a dictatorial Alawi clique, Bashar al-Asad surely feared that any significant political reforms would have exposed him further to internal and external threats.

A decade later, in the context of the regional turmoil that led to the demise of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and President Hosni Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt respectively, the regime was even less inclined to contemplate political compromise. It was well equipped to counter militant opposition, but far less so civil opposition and demands for political reform. From the outset, Asad handled the demonstrations very badly and, having failed to crush the opposition during the early months of the uprising, the regime provoked the militarisation of the contest. It framed the protests as a confrontation between terrorists and the state, moved to shore up Alawi support, and constructed a counter-insurrection narrative that depicted the opposition movement as a front for a radical sectarian agenda against a secular Arab nationalist Syria and all those who would be disenfranchised in a Sunni Islamist state. It is highly unlikely that Bashar could have introduced significant political reforms and at the same time consolidated his rule by enhancing his domestic support base: the legitimacy deficit from which his father's regime

suffered had exponentially increased and, in the absence of Soviet support, he was increasingly reliant on Iran. Compounding these political difficulties, his tenure came at a nodal point in the international relations of the Middle East. The September 11 al-Qaeda terrorist attacks led to an assertion of US power in the Middle East that had a dramatic impact on Syria.

While Hafez al-Asad faced a considerable challenge from the Muslim Brotherhood during 1976–82—funded and supported by his great rival Saddam Hussein—and an attempted *coup* in 1983–84 led by his brother Rifaat, with the support of the Soviets he was able to advance, balance and maintain Syria's position as a front-line state in the Arab–Israeli conflict. This brought significant political and financial dividends from the Gulf during the last two decades of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Hafez al-Asad switched track by joining the Arab–Israeli peace process and supporting the Western-led anti-Saddam front after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. This détente with the West ended abruptly after the September 11 attacks, forcing Bashar to forge ever closer relations with Iran—a state that the US sought to contain through its invasion of Iraq. From the perspective of the Bush Administration in Washington, this placed Syria on the wrong side of history.

Domestic oil revenue and financial windfalls from the Gulf—in lieu of Syria's front-line status in the Arab–Israeli conflict after Camp David and its response to the first Gulf War—enabled Hafez al-Asad to finance the regime's entourage and social networks, fund state subsidies and provide basic welfare for the Syrian people. Although Syria was largely free from the burden of foreign debt there was no significant economic windfall from East or West with which to bolster Bashar al-Asad's position after he took office. Drought, dwindling oil reserves and the introduction of a liberal economic reform programme, which Hafez al-Asad had considered as far back as the 1970s,[25] upended the social contract upon which the regime derived much of its support (see Alan George, Chapter 8). Consequently, these economic reforms, which soon digressed into crony capitalism, had a deep impact on Syrian society and came at the expense of weakening the key pillars of the Asad state. Yet economic reform seemed unavoidable given the enormous demographic expansion that Syria had experienced in recent decades (see Fabrice Balanche, Chapter 4), and it was not without its merits as Syria did enjoy a boost from Arab investment in the mid-2000s.[26] The reform process rapidly increased existing socio-economic disparities: no social support network was in place to ease Syria's transition toward becoming a market economy; a new class of corrupt business elites thrived; and the state's withdrawal from the social pact

under which fuel and food products were heavily subsidised hurt the poorest in the countryside and in the cities. So while Hafez al-Asad had depended on Alawi solidarity in the military and governed through the Ba'ath Party, Bashar was forced to consolidate his rule through the support of new Alawi business elites, concentrating power in the presidency as he faced down the obstructionism of the old Ba'ath Party notables.

With respect to social mobilisation, it could be argued that the regime's response to the protests in Syria's cities undermined its own legitimacy. Cognisant of its vulnerability and those determined to exploit its weaknesses both internally and externally, the regime forged no grandiose strategy to alter its course, bend to pressure, or endeavour to resolve the crisis politically. Its civil war strategy was simply to survive, militarily, at any cost, and bind itself to the Alawi community. In doing so, it set out to hold Syria's cities and Mediterranean coastline through regime cohesion and uncompromising foreign policy. It could not defend Syria's enormous borders with Turkey, Iraq and Jordan and did not invest great resources in efforts to do so. Tactically, it maintained maximum flexibility by taking an incremental approach to regional and international developments as they evolved, while employing the full range of political and military options at its disposal, including brinkmanship (see Reinoud Leenders, Chapter 12). Perhaps the most important example of the latter is the atrocious chemical weapons attack on the opposition-held Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, on 21 August 2013, and its international fallout.[27]

Western pressure on the Asad regime peaked following the assault. Accusing the regime of violating international law by using chemical weapons against its own people, Obama considered sending 'a shot across the bow' in the form of limited military action.[28] When British Prime Minister David Cameron lost a crucial vote in the House of Commons concerning the principle of UK military intervention in Syria,[29] uncertain of US Congressional support for further military involvement in the Middle East, Obama decided not to fire his warning shot. The debacle represented a turning point in the Syrian civil war and the regime's bid to maintain power; it was clear that the West would not intervene militarily to tip the balance in the opposition's favour or bring about regime change. Irrespective of who ordered the attack, the use of chemical weapons against civilians in Damascus exposed the West's deep apprehension over making a military commitment to intervene in Syria's civil war. More than that, it confirmed what many observers had suspected since the civil war began: US policy toward Syria was to have no firm or consistent basis so as to ensure that Obama could avoid military intervention.

Whoever ordered the attack and threw down the gauntlet to the West took a calculated risk, but the regime's subsequent decision to open Syria up to a UN-led chemical weapons decommissioning programme, at the behest of Russia, illustrated its tactical astuteness. This marked the end of a period of renewed intense Western pressure on Asad to leave office and something of a reversal of fortunes in the international propaganda war over Syria, as Islamists began to dominate the opposition. The incident also reveals something about the structure of power in the regime and how successful it was in maintaining solidarity and cohesion (see Reinoud Leenders, Chapter 12). Lacking his father's standing, Bashar al-Asad was a figurehead in what might be thought of as an Alawi dominated dictatorial regime rather than a dictatorship. Paradoxically, despite the fact that Syria's authoritarian centre weakened after he took office, prior to 2015 this fragmentation of power did not prevent the regime from maintaining unity and avoiding the level of internal dissent that might trigger a *coup* or spark high-ranking defections to the opposition.

The regime appeared to have eradicated residual internal dissent in the summer of 2012. Weeks prior to a bomb attack at the heart of the Damascus security establishment, which killed his brother-in-law Assef Shawkat and two top generals,[30] Bashar al-Asad informed a reshuffled government that it faced 'real war' from the outside.[31] Correspondingly, the regime hardened and widened its military response to the opposition, culminating in the Ghouta attack when rebel positions threatened Damascus.

At the time of writing, no state or coalition of states has intervened with the intent of maintaining Syria within its present borders. Wedded to the Alawi community, and with the softening Western position towards it, the regime may well survive the civil war in some form and contain a long-running insurgency with external support, but the secular integrationist state that Hafez al-Asad built cannot be put back together. Until 2015, with the support of Iran and Hizballah, the regime maintained its position in Syria's key cities and the Alawi-dominated coastal strip, having accepted *de facto* Kurdish autonomy and the loss of vast swathes of territory to Islamist militias. The regime's external patrons provided the support necessary to prevent it from losing the war, while its international opponents failed to follow up on their anti-Asad rhetoric with hard power. The West had no appetite for the sort of military intervention that saw Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi overthrown in 2011; prior to the ascendency of the Islamists its efforts focused on international diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and providing limited support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Crucially, during the early years of the civil war, the

West failed to garner enough international support to push through penalising UN Security Council resolutions against Syria. It also failed to nurture Syria's fractious opposition movement into an inclusive, representative and effective alternative to the regime. One defining feature of the early civil war years was that while the regime remained homogeneous, cohesive and resilient, the opposition, rather than coalescing and consolidating, became ever more heterogeneous, divided and unrepresentative. In contrast to the resources available to its Islamist opponents and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the regime had an arsenal of weapons at its disposal, almost all of which it was prepared to use: an army of over 220,000 with a similar number of reservists;[32] official and unofficial pro-government militias (see Aron Lund, Chapter 10); and significant military support from Iran and Hizballah. Not only did the Western-backed Syrian opposition fail to organise politically, in the absence of the support required to defeat the regime it appeared increasingly irrelevant as al-Nusra Front and ISIS made sweeping gains across Syria and Iraq.

Having recognised the Syrian National Coalition as a 'legitimate representative' of the Syrian people in late 2012 (see Carsten Wieland, Chapter 11),[33] the West did succeed in getting it to attend the Geneva II Conference on Syria in 2014, which was chaired by UN–Arab League Special Envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi. In the absence of a robust mandate from the international community, Brahimi's political process lacked teeth. There was no UN shuttle diplomacy between the capitals of Moscow, Tehran, Riyadh, Damascus or Beirut, and there was no Western recognition that to end a civil war in such a deeply divided society, with a kaleidoscope of regional and international conflicts being fought out on its soil, there had to be a way out for the Alawi community and for a regime that viewed the war in zero-sum terms.

Opportunities were certainly missed in the 2012–14 period, but by the time the Geneva II talks occurred the regime was under no great pressure to compromise and the Syrian National Council did not have a sufficient mandate from the Syrian people or the strength on the ground to make it a credible negotiating partner. Had the opposite been true, then Islamists would not have had the military and financial backing with which to fill the vacuum in Syria. More than that, with no expectation of any significant progress, increasingly fearful of home grown jihadis returning from the war to conduct terror attacks in their cities, the focus of many Western powers in attendance at Geneva II had shifted from removing the Alawi led regime to fighting Sunni Islamist extremism, an issue which also concerned the Russians, given their problems in the rebellious North Caucasus.

Confident that the opposition was too divided to compromise, the regime widened its political traction by attending the Geneva II talks, while growing Western apprehension over the latent Islamist threat reinforced its sectarian discourse. Up until 2014, the energy of the international actors in terms of the money, arms and fighters being poured into Syria by Asad's supporters and detractors—aside from the catastrophic humanitarian crisis caused by the war—had caused remarkably little spill-over of violence into neighbouring states. During 2014, this order was reversed when ISIS went on the offensive capturing the Iraqi cities of Fallujah and Mosul, attacking the Lebanese Army and Hizballah in the border town of Arsal, and attempting to capture the Kurdish town of Kobane on the Syrian border with Turkey which led to the sort of Western intervention that the FSA had long been crying out for, only against the regime.

Reflecting on the failed Geneva talks process, Brahimi concluded that the Asad regime never doubted for a moment that it was capable of emerging victorious in the struggle for Syria against what it perceived as Western-backed insurgents and thus never took the talks seriously.[34] Clearly, this was the Asad regime's view during the first four years of the war. The question for the future is whether the Asad regime will have the capacity or the interest to block a deal if Russia and Iran eventually attempt to broker a settlement to the conflict with the West. In February 2013, speaking about the West's continued focus on removing Asad from power Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov remarked that 'Asad is not going to move. He said this publically and he will not listen to us, to the Chinese, to the Iranians, to no one. He said: "I am Syrian, I was born here, I am protecting my people and I will die in Syria..." This is a fact which is recognised by all those who have any contacts, direct or indirect, with Damascus. So, therefore, the longer people insist on having his departure as a precondition for any dialogue, the more lives will be lost.'[35]

By 2015, all efforts to construct a political framework to end Syria's civil war through negotiations had failed. The ethnic, tribal and sectarian forces unleashed by the Arab uprising in the Levant, and other parts of the Middle East, had exceeded even the most pessimistic warnings[36]—most notably the agency of jihadist forces which provoked a reversal of Western policy in Iraq and Syria in 2014 having taken full advantage of the constitutional uncertainty pervasive in the region after the US withdrew from Iraq. The political objective of the most potent of these forces, the self-proclaimed and yet unrecognised Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, is to break what it perceives as the colonial Sykes–Picot state system which has endured since the collapse of the

Ottoman Empire, and carve out a rump Sunni entity.[37] Given the threat that Islamist groups posed to Syria and its neighbours in 2014–15, their ascendancy saw the Asad regime momentarily strengthen its position—with robust support from Iran, Russia, Hizballah and, more indirectly, China—from being viewed by the West as the primary obstacle to finding a political solution to the Syrian civil war, to being considered the lesser of two evils in a conflict of great regional significance. So much so that, in March 2015, US Secretary of State John Kerry indicated that the US was willing to 're-ignite' negotiations with the Syrian government to find a 'diplomatic outcome' to the conflict.[38] Yet regaining control over the entire Syrian territory is beyond the regime's capabilities, maintaining government authority in the key cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Hama and Homs has become increasingly challenging, and a regime retreat to the Latakia-Tartus Mediterranean coastal strip is no longer unthinkable.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the future of Syria's Alawi community remains inimically linked to the Asad regime; it is hostage to Bashar's realpolitik approach to a zero-sum conflict that transcends Syria's borders, the outcome of which will have great significance for the future power balance in the region. The geographical and political constitution of a post-civil war Syria remains uncertain; no political or military solution to its multifaceted conflicts is presently obvious. Thus the changes that the Alawi community has experienced politically, socially, geographically and in terms of identity over the course of the last five years are salient as the Arab nationalist, secular and integrationist state-building project of Hafez al-Asad lies in ruin. As the different readings of its contemporary experience presented in this book illustrate, despite the civil war, the Alawi community and the Asad regime are not one and the same. Yet the Syrian civil war has activated sectarian and ethnic boundaries—existing religious, cultural and social modes of inter-communal coexistence have been antagonised, broken and fragmented within this deeply divided society—and this will prove enduring.

In 2014, when a group of high-school children from the Azizia village in the suburbs of Aleppo were asked to articulate their vision of a future Syria, one Alawi boy replied that 'the people of Syria have always lived under one banner—peaceful coexistence'. He contended that the Sunni community had broken Syria's secular pact of coexistence and, in a refrain of solidarity, his

classmates waved posters of their president and chanted the Alawi loyalist civil war slogan: '*God, Syria, Bashar and nothing else*'.[39] The Syrian regime expects nothing else from the Alawi community and it will accept nothing else. It never intended to compromise with any of the opposition forces confronting it in the war for Syria, and the majority of the Alawi youth growing up in the shadow of this conflict have no doubt that those forces represent a threat to their very existence.

PART I

ALAWIS: SECRECY AND SURVIVAL

1

THE GENESIS OF SYRIA'S ALAWI COMMUNITY

Aslam Farouk-Alli

On 31 May 2013, as the civil war in Syria escalated to unprecedented levels, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi—arguably one of the twenty-first century's most influential reformist Sunni scholars—ascended the pulpit of the Umar ibn al-Khattab Mosque in the Qatari capital Doha and pronounced: 'The Nusayris are more disbelieving than the Jews and the Christians, as Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah said about them. We see them today killing people like mice and cats, by the thousands and tens of thousands. Asad has come to rule by his own authority and with him his Nusayri sect.'[1] With these provocative words, al-Qaradawi urged Muslims all over the world to make their way to the besieged Syrian town of Qusayr to lend a hand to the Syrian opposition fighting against the Asad regime and its Lebanese Shi'a Islamist allies, Hizballah.

Religious justification for intervening in the Syrian crisis did not only issue from the Sunni camp, however, and in response to a question pertaining to seeking parental consent to travel to Syria to defend the burial site of Sayyidah Zaynab, the daughter of Imam 'Ali—the last of the righteous caliphs and the first Imam according to Twelver Shi'a doctrine—Ayatollah Seyed Kazem Haeri ruled that parental permission for such matters was not necessary.[2] In

an earlier pronouncement, one of Haeri's peers, Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Sadegh Rouhani—also based at the influential seminary town of Qom in Iran—went even further, legitimising *jihad* in Syria for the purpose of protecting Shi'a holy sites and regarding individuals killed in the process as martyrs. These and other similar *fatwas* resulted in the opening of official registration sites in Iran that served the purpose of facilitating travel to Syria to participate in the *jihad*.[3]

Acute communal polarisation is a natural consequence of civil war, but taking recourse to sharp sectarian polemics not only fuels the flames of religious hatred, it also ultimately reduces complex political phenomena to dogmatically-sealed interpretations that severely impede our understanding. A careful reading of the history of the Alawi community in Syria therefore presents an opportunity to interrogate the way in which the religious and the political intertwine and shed light upon the current impasse in the country and the region. An appropriate point of departure is to examine how the Alawi community came into being, what its beliefs are and to what extent the sect's genesis and dogma have had an impact upon its evolution as a political community.[4]

The birth of the Nusayriyyah (Alawi) sect and its historical evolution

The emergence of clearly defined doctrinal schools within the Islamic tradition was the product of an intellectual and socio-political ferment that took several centuries to crystallise.[5] Importantly, the origins of the Sunni–Shi'a division within Islam are attributable to a dispute over the political leadership of the nascent Muslim community that resulted in the assassination of the third Caliph—'Uthman ibn 'Affan—and the splitting of that community between his supporters and those of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib.[6] It was only over the course of the next three hundred years, however, that the two schools were separated by distinctive systems of belief and practice. Doctrinal polemics between Sunnis and Shi'as are, therefore, a relatively late phenomenon. The doctrinal school of *ahl as-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (followers of the Prophetic Practice and Community), from which the 'Sunnis' derived their name, emerged as the result of contestation between traditional scholars of the Prophetic teachings (*ahl al-Hadith*) and Mutazilite scholars that propounded a brand of Islamic rationalism that was strongly influenced by Persian and Greek philosophies. In the mid-ninth century, the Mutazilites were supported by the 'Abbasid Court which tried to enforce esoteric Mutazilite beliefs as

official doctrine, resulting in a strong backlash from the traditional establishment, led notably by 'Ahmad ibn Hanbal. It is in the writings of Ibn Hanbal that the term *ahl as-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* makes one of its earliest appearances in relation to a distinctive Sunni doctrinal school.[7]

In a similar fashion the Shi'a doctrine of *al-Imamah* (belief in the Infallible Leader), which is now the central pillar of Twelver Shi'a belief,[8] also took hundreds of years to find clear articulation and many early Shi'a polemics were focused on internal differences resulting in the emergence of different Shi'a sects. A very rich account of this is provided by the Shi'a scholar al-Hasan ibn Musa an-Nawbakhti (d.300–310H/912–922 CE) in his book *Firaq ash-Shī'ah*,[9] which is one of the oldest extant works of Twelver Shi'a doctrine. This work presents one of the earliest accounts of the Nusayris,[10] who in the early twentieth century would become known as Alawis and whose evolution into a clearly definable religious sect took a considerable amount of time.

Prior to the division of the Middle East into nation states in the twentieth century, religious belief was the primary identity marker for the people of this realm. The subjects of the various Islamic empires had historically been differentiated and grouped according to their religious affiliations, a pattern that was eventually institutionalised by the Ottomans (over the course of their mandate from the sixteenth to the twentieth century) and that came to be known as the *millet* system.[11] Alawis had therefore, since their emergence as a religious community until modern times, been differentiated from other confessional groups on the basis of their religious beliefs, and it is therefore important to present briefly the main aspects of their faith.[12] Mahmud Faksh points out that the Alawi religion crystallised in the tenth and eleventh centuries as a mixture of various Islamic and non-Islamic beliefs and practices and he emphasises several of its defining characteristics.

The first characteristic, which Faksh argues is derived from paganism, is the idea of a divine triad, of its successive manifestations in the seven cycles of world history, and of the transmigration of souls. Accordingly: 'God revealed himself to the world seven different times: each time with two persons who, with God, made a holy trinity. The Alawis also believe that at first all Alawis were stars in the world of light, into which a virtuous Alawi is transformed upon death. A sinning Alawi becomes a Jew, Muslim or Christian.'[13] Yaron Friedman however takes issue with the exclusively pagan provenance of the divine triad as described by Faksh and more accurately argues that 'the terminology used to define the aspects of the divine triad seems to derive from existing Shīʿī groups that maintain the cult of three elements in Shīʿī mysti-

cism, the *ʿayn*, the *mīm* and the *sīn*, each representing a subject of adoration: ʿAlī, Muḥammad and Salmān.'[14]

The second defining characteristic of the Alawi religion, according to Faksh, is derived from Shi'a Islam: 'the Alawis took over the belief in a system of successive divine emanations and the cult of Ali (the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law). Unlike other Shi'as, the Alawis believe that Ali was the incarnation of God Himself in a divine triad: Ali is the *Ma'na* (meaning or essence); Muhammad, whom Ali created in his own light, is the *Ism* (name), and Salman al-Farsi (the Persian; one of the Companions of the Prophet) is the *Bab* (gate). This is the most distinguishing feature of the Alawi religion, namely the centrality of Ali, whom the Alawis deify.'[15] Friedman once again provides a more nuanced account of the deification of Ali and argues that the Nusayris reject the doctrine of *hulul* (incarnation), or the presence of the Creator in a human body. They believe that Ali is a manifestation (*zuhur*) of the Divine Creator and are at pains to point out that this is not a total manifestation of God as that would place limitations on the Divine Creator. Accordingly, only some of God's characteristics are manifested in Ali in order to incite humans towards belief.[16]

The third defining characteristic shares commonality with Ismaʿili Shi'a beliefs and the Alawis accordingly also subscribe to the idea of an esoteric religious knowledge hidden from the masses and revealed to only a few who are initiated into the secrets in a lengthy and complex initiation. As such, both the Ismaʿilis and the Alawis are known in Arabic as *al-batiniyah*, in reference to the undisclosed tenets of their religion.[17]

Finally, Faksh points out that much of the rituals that differentiate Alawis from other Muslims have been taken from Christianity and he cites the use of ceremonial wine and the observance of Christmas as two examples of such borrowed practices.[18]

As is clear from this succinct account,[19] Alawi beliefs are syncretic and the socio-political contexts of the Alawi founding fathers and subsequent scholars have contributed tremendously to the evolution and transformation of these beliefs. It must also be noted that much of what was written about the Alawis in the pre-modern era has been highly polemical, due in part to widespread hostility to the community and also to the lack of direct access to the theological works of what is still ostensibly a very secretive sect. When Sami al-Jundi, the Syrian Ismaʿili Minister of Information during General Salah Jadid's rule (1966–70) suggested that the 'secret books' of the Alawis be made public in an attempt to quell growing sectarian hostility towards them, Jadid—who

was an Alawi himself—refused, fearing a backlash from the Alawi *sheikhs*.[20] It was only from the nineteenth century that works on Alawi doctrine written by Alawis themselves began to appear and these works were polarised between confirming the Alawi sect's heterodox beliefs[21] and putting forward the view that the Alawis were no different from the Twelver Shi'as, dismissing the polemical views as prejudicial.[22]

In addition to exploring the sect's doctrinal beliefs, it is also important to track the geographical spread and distribution of the Alawi community as it grew over time. The founder of the sect, Muhammad ibn Nusayr al-Bakri an-Namiri (d.883 or 873) was born in Iraq and declared himself to be the *bab* (door) to the eleventh Shi'a Imam, al-Hasan al-'Askari.[23] Although Ibn Nusayr's ideas were not recorded in writing, and although he was regarded as an extremist and a heretic by his Shi'a contemporaries, he was still able to gather a group of followers around him who continued appointing successive *babs*.[24] Ibn Nusayr was succeeded by Abu Muhammad ibn Jundub, about whom very little is known, other than that he was succeeded by Abu Muhammad al-Janan al-Junbulani (d.900), a Persian Sufi from Junbula in Iraq. The latter travelled to Egypt, where he met as-Sayyid al-Husayn ibn Hamdan al-Khasibi (d.947). In Egypt, Al-Khasibi adopted al-Junbulani's Sufi teachings and later resettled in Baghdad and subsequently in Aleppo, where he established a Sufi order. The teachings of al-Khasibi greatly influenced a young adherent from Tiberias, Palestine, Abu Sa'id al-Maymun at-Tabarani (d.1031). At the age of eighteen, at-Tabarani moved to Aleppo where he adopted al-Khasibi's teachings, moving later to Latakia to preach and consolidate the Nusayri faith. At-Tabarani's writings soon became the basis of Alawi doctrine.[25] At that time Latakia—or Laodicea, as it was known—was still under Byzantine control and, unhindered by Islamic authority, at-Tabarani was at liberty to proselytise and convert the peasants (possibly still pagan) of the mountainous hinterland of the town.[26]

The coastal mountains of Latakia and its environs hereon became the geographic sanctum of the Alawi community. Owing to their significant concentration in this region and common sectarian identity, later historians would refer to the Alawis as a 'compact minority'.[27] The engagement and interaction of the Alawi community with the outside world found expression from this point onward in what can best be described as a historical pattern, constantly repeating itself: exchanges with outsiders were characterised either by clashes and confrontation, mutually beneficial cooperation or attempts to assimilate into the broader fabric of society.

At the turn of the twelfth century, the western part of the Alawi territory was conquered by the Crusaders and, after a long siege, the Norman Tancred captured the city of Latakia. Although after this Norman Conquest the northern areas of what is today known as the coastal mountains or Alawi mountains formed part of the Norman principality of Antioch, Christian penetration of the mountain region was negligible.[28] Nonetheless, the Alawi community's Sunni neighbours in time accused them of collaborating with the Crusaders. Later in the century, Shi'a Isma'ilis settled in the region taking possession of several fortresses in the southern Jablah region, which provoked tensions and clashes with the Alawis. In 1188, Jablah and the surrounding areas were conquered by Salah ad-Din and came under the control of the Ayyubid Sultanate. In the Mamluk period, Sultan Baybars took control of several of the Isma'ili fortresses in the region and made numerous attempts to convert and assimilate the Alawis into the Sunni mainstream; they did this by forbidding Alawi initiations and built mosques throughout the region.[29] Such attempts, however, were not successful and did not prevent Alawi resistance and rebellion.

The centrality of religious identity and the sharpness of sectarian polarisation in the fourteenth-century Mamluk era is poignantly reflected in the famous *fatwa* issued by the Sunni Salafi-Reformist Scholar Ibn Taymiyyah in 1317, in which he judges the Nusayris to be 'more disbelieving than the Jews and the Christians'.[30] Ibn Taymiyyah's relatively lengthy response to the Alawi question does not provide any insight into the historical context that prompted the inquiry. Rather he focuses on various aspects of interaction with the Alawis from the perspective of permissibility and prohibition, providing valuable insights into how this marginalised community was perceived by the Sunni mainstream. Ibn Taymiyyah said that it is not permissible to intermarry with them, to eat their food, use their utensils and clothing unless washed or to bury them in Muslim burial grounds. On the other hand, it is permissible to contract them to undertake specified work and to pay them according to the agreed upon terms. If they should repent and profess the faith, they should still not be allowed to bear arms and should be sent where they are isolated from other Nusayris, so that if their professed faith is insincere, they will at least not be able to harm other Muslims. He concludes that going on *jihad* against the Nusayris and commanding the good and forbidding that which is evil are the best of deeds.[31]

Insight into the historical context that informs Ibn Taymiyyah's *fatwa* is provided by one of his most accomplished students, the historian Ibn Kathir.[32] According to Ibn Kathir a Nusayri rebellion in 1317 was incited by a certain

Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, who claimed to be the *Mahdi* (Messiah) and the incarnate of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib.[33] He proclaimed that the Muslims were disbelievers and that the Nusayris were on the path of truth and managed to gather a huge following, with whom he attacked the city of Jablah, killing many of its inhabitants, destroying mosques and turning them into wineries. Prisoners were commanded to bow before him and declare him their God and Saviour if they wanted to be emancipated. The Mamluk authorities finally sent troops to quell the uprising and many Nusayris were in turn also slaughtered.[34]

This account is also mentioned in the travelogue[35] of the famous Arab itinerant Ibn Battutah, but his rendition is far more nuanced and demonstrates that the politics of this era were by no means bereft of pragmatism. Hanna Batatu provides an insightful summary and interpretation of this event:

> The 'Alawīs were the food-producers of many of these parts for centuries. As long ago as 1317, in the days of the Mamluks (as can be read in the pages of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah), the Sultan of Cairo, having learnt of a violent uprising by the 'Alawīs in the district of Jablah, ordered that they be put to the sword. 'But these people,' urged the Chief of the Amirs of Tripoli in protest, 'work the land for the Muslims and if they are killed, the Muslims will be enfeebled.' The rebels were thus spared on account of their vital economic function.[36]

The lot of the Alawis was thus never enviable.[37] They were at best tolerated and at worst the victims of terrible persecution. This pattern continued prior to and after the Ottoman conquest of the region in 1516, and the fate of the Alawis continued to swing between persecution and neglect.

The Ottomans were already at war with the Shi'a Safavid Empire that ruled over Persia (1502–1736) and, fearing possible collaboration between the Safavids and the Shi'as of Greater Syria prior to its conquest, Sultan Selim I ordered a census of the various Shi'a sects living adjacent to the border with Persia and massacred them.[38] Alawi historical accounts suggest that Selim I's conquest of Syria included expeditions against the Nusayris, legitimised by *fatwas* obtained by the Sultan from a Damascene scholar, Sheikh Nuh al-Hanafi al-Dimashqi.[39] In the 1820s the Ottoman authorities once again took recourse to a *fatwa* by a certain Sheikh Muhammad Ibrahim Nasir al-Din al-Mugrabi to quell the continuous state of Alawi insurgency in the areas around Latakia.[40] The onset of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of the rapid decline of the Ottoman Empire, but the conditions of the Alawi community in Syria remained dismal: not only were they marginalised and oppressed from the outside, they also remained extremely divided from within. As the world around them began rapidly changing, however, so did their fate.

In October 1831, the Egyptian Army began a campaign to conquer Greater Syria.[41] The well-trained Egyptian Army under the command of Ibrahim Pasha easily overran the Ottoman Army and, after signing a peace treaty in May 1833, Muhammad Ali—Egypt's powerful ruler—considered Greater Syria, Crete and Adana as much a part of his domain as Egypt.[42] While the Ottomans remained committed to winning these territories back, the Egyptians nonetheless began conscripting the Syrians into their army and the first Nusayri (Alawi) uprising in September 1834 erupted in response to this unwelcome intrusion.[43] The fighting lasted for eight months and, interestingly, the Alawi rebels were supported by the Ottomans.[44] When the Ottomans regained control of Syria in 1841, however, they picked up where the Egyptians left off and began conscripting Syrians into their army, including Alawis. Even though conscription was once again strongly resisted and remained a cause for rebellion, it was the first step towards the social transformation and integration of the Alawis into the institutional apparatuses of the state and, therefore, into the broader social fabric of Syrian society as well.

In the late nineteenth century, as the Ottoman Empire became further embroiled in external conflicts, it was forced to accommodate the aspirations of the marginalised Alawis. A case in point is that of the rise and fall of the charismatic Alawi tribal leader Isma'il Khayr Bey, who was reputedly a vicious brigand, but was nevertheless employed in the service of the Ottomans and aspired to entrench his influence over the province of Homs.[45] Isma'il took advantage of the Ottoman Empire's preoccupation with the Crimean war in 1853 and took over the large district of Safita, which was mostly inhabited by Nusayris. Instead of fighting him, the Ottomans decided to grant him a formal position of authority as they were deeply engaged in the war against Russia and most of the Ottoman troops that were stationed in Syria had been dispatched to the battlefield.[46] Isma'il proved to be a capable administrator and an effective tax collector and his success contributed to his growing ambition. Isma'il went on to become the first Nusayri leader to rule over a large area that included Nusayris, Christians and Sunni Muslims. While he won the admiration of most of the Nusayris, local Sunnis were offended by the fact that they were under the authority of a 'heretic'. After the end of the Crimean war (1856) regular Ottoman troops began returning to Syria, and even though they renewed his governorship, the Ottomans became increasingly wary of Isma'il's influence. He was finally removed in 1858, not so much by the Ottomans but by the lack of solidarity and unity amongst the Nusayris; Isma'il's own uncle betrayed, killed and decapitated him and handed his head over to the Ottomans.[47]

In addition to quelling the fires of internal rebellions, the Ottomans were further burdened with the now near impossible task of curbing foreign encroachment. Western countries such as France and England had been granted capitulations by the Ottoman Sultans as early as the sixteenth century to facilitate trade, and foreigners were thus also allowed to stay and travel through the Empire for pilgrimage and to conduct business.[48] By the nineteenth century, Western powers were using their presence to further their political interests in the crumbling empire and sought to do so by strengthening ties with local religious minorities.[49] Religion therefore became the sharp edge that was used to carve up the spoils of the weakened Ottoman Empire. The British exercised influence by championing the cause of the Druze, the French supported the Christian Maronites and the Russians backed the Greek Orthodox; initially, no one paid any attention to the Alawis, but they finally drew the attention of American Protestant missionaries,[50] who made them the object of their evangelical zeal. For the Alawi community, American missionary activity brought with it opportunities for self-improvement and social mobility. The Alawis also benefited from the schools that were established to provide them with structured education for the first time in their history. The Ottomans became anxious about the increasing missionary activity and consequently attempted to redress the situation by trying to win the Alawis over to Sunni Islam.[51] Therefore it was missionary activity that provided the impetus for the Ottoman state to intervene to improve the lot of the Alawis. Even though the missionaries failed in their primary goal of converting the Alawis to Christianity, they stirred a desire within the community for social integration. The Alawis began sensing the importance of belonging to broader society and grasped how this could be advantageous in the rapidly changing environment. Such political awareness drove home the realisation that they were part of the Muslim world and becoming Christian was not as important as being Muslim, since the missionaries would one day depart, leaving them to face their destiny alone. Therefore by the 1920s the Alawis began asserting their Muslim identity and declared their adherence to Shi'a Islam.[52] With the onset of the twentieth century the Ottoman Empire was a shadow of its former self. It finally disintegrated and was quickly absorbed by the victorious Allied Powers after World War I.

The Alawi ascent—from empires and faith communities to citizenship and statehood

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire had a tremendous impact on the Muslim world. For the Arab peoples who lived within its domain, its dismemberment

marked the end of a political, social and religious order that had shaped their patterns of social behaviour for over 400 years.[53] The end of empire and the onset of Western domination also marked the emergence of a modern Arab intelligentsia not exclusively influenced by the Islamic tradition, but influenced by Western modernity as well. Reform-minded intellectuals rose to the double challenge of reconciling their inherited traditions with the challenges of the modern world: they had to engage in an internal dialogue with their own rich past so as to draw upon the essential elements that had defined them, while simultaneously engaging in an external cross-cultural dialogue so as to understand and confront the challenges of a new and different reality inspired exclusively by the West.[54]

Islamism and Arabism emerged as the dominant intellectual trends in the region; the latter was influenced by Western nationalist discourse and the former sought to sow the seeds of a political community within the framework of the broader congregation of the Muslim faithful. The hopes and ambitions that these nascent ideologies inspired were quickly tempered, however, by the harsh reality of Western domination; Syria's fate was placed in the hands of France as a result of a secret accord—the Sykes–Picot Agreement—signed between the British and the French during the war. The sharing of the spoils between the two countries was formalised by the League of Nations' mandate system, and France became Syria's colonial master in September 1923.[55]

It was only natural that the Syrian state established by the French in the Mandate period would be derisively looked upon as an artificial entity that upset the natural harmony of *Bilad ash-Sham*, a geographical designation that in Arab history referred to the territory covering what is today Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon.[56] More importantly, the Syrian state was not founded in response to the aspirations of its inhabitants but rather in the face of the defiant opposition of the vast majority who demanded the establishment of an Arab state that would stretch across the lands of geographical Syria at the very least, and if possible include Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula as well.[57] As Eyal Zisser cogently argues, the French did not regard the establishment of the Syrian state as a fundamental objective of their colonial presence in the region. Explaining further, he insightfully maintains:

> Indeed, immediately after taking control of the entire Levant in 1920, the French acted to fragment the area. The internal region of Syria was divided into two states; Aleppo and Damascus (based on the Ottoman *vilayets*), which were only united in 1924. In addition, the French established states for the ethnic and religious minorities in the Syrian territory: a Druze state in the area of Jabal Druze, with its capital

> Suwayda, and an 'Alawi state along the 'Alawi coast, with its capital Ladhiqiyya. Autonomous districts were also established in the Jazira (then populated mostly by Kurds and Turkmen) and in Alexandretta, which also had a large Turkish population. The establishment of the state of Lebanon should also be seen as, *inter alia*, part of the effort to fragment Syria. The French intention was to ensure their future control over this territory, once it had fallen into their hands. Even when they set up the Syrian state at the end of the 1920s, they hampered the establishment and operation of its governmental institutions. Rather they continued to strengthen and entrench the forces of disunity and divisiveness in Syrian society, including sectarian and regional rivalries and the gulf between the urban and rural populations. The legacy of French Mandatory rule would later prove a handicap for the post-independence Syrian regime.[58]

The French occupation sparked the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925, which was the first mass movement against colonial rule in the Middle East and which provided a model for popular nationalism and resistance that remains potent to this day.[59] French rule was, in many ways, a continuation of Ottoman policies, with a similar reliance on local elites—who were predominantly of a Sunni background—serving as mediators between the central state and the local society. This dynamic was famously described by Albert Hourani as the 'politics of notables'.[60] Elaborating further, Philip Khoury demonstrated that under both Ottoman and French rule notables played the role of minimising the political aspirations of the masses in return for variable and qualified access to political power and economic gain.[61] Such brinkmanship was unsustainable and, as Michael Provence has argued, the 1925 Revolt was a signal event, ushering in the emergence of mass politics in the Arab world and the decisive breakdown of the elite-dominated system of the 'politics of notables'.[62]

Nonetheless, the Alawi community still remained internally divided at the onset of the French occupation. The four loose Alawi tribal associations of the Khayyatun, Haddadun, Matawirah and Kalbiyyah were not organised in a unified, hierarchical structure with internal cohesion or a centralised leadership or authority (See Fig. 1.1). In addition, religious sub-divisions (Shamsis, Qamaris and Murshidiyyun) further eroded the Alawi community's sense of oneness.[63] The Alawis' historical background as a compact religious minority and their internal divisions were exploited by the French,[64] who nurtured the already existing kernel of separatism as a way to stifle the national independence movement that was closely associated with and controlled by Sunni Islamism.[65]

Despite their manipulative attempts to steer Syria in a direction that accorded with their own vested interests, the French ultimately failed to read the implications of the social and political changes taking place during the

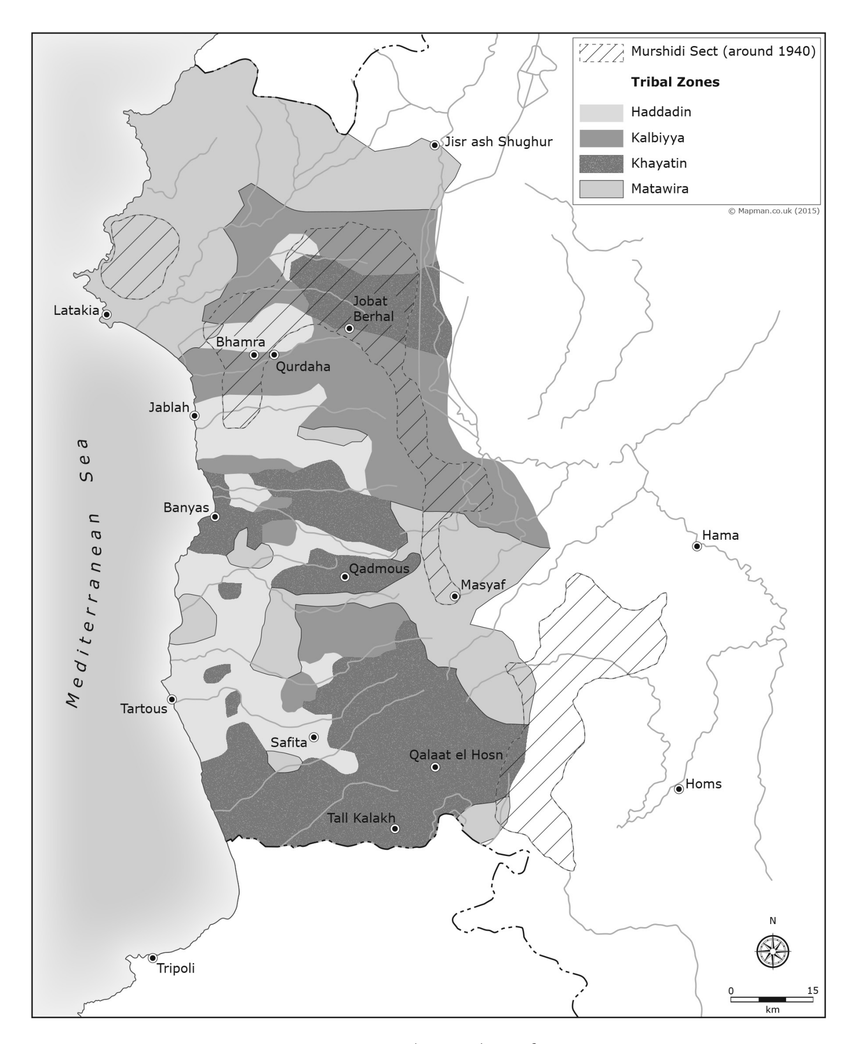


Fig. 1.1: The Alawi tribes of Syria

Mandate period correctly. It was no longer possible to manipulate Alawi traditional leaders in a manner that served French agendas. Jaber al-Abbas—France's most important protégé and the chief of the Khayyatin tribal confederation—became a devoted supporter of the nationalist cause after his French masters abandoned him.[66] By contrast, the proclaimed nationalist and accomplished poet Muhammad Suleiman al-Ahmed (Badawi al-Jabal)—who

had served as King Faisal's personal secretary before the Mandate—turned out to be an ardent separatist who invoked French protection against Sunni domination.[67] A new pattern of organisation was being manifest in Alawi society and political ties and associations were being established along new lines—traversing sectarian and religious barriers—and the Alawi community began reflecting the characteristics of a mixed, more modern society.[68]

In 1936 the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence was signed, paving the way for the reincorporation of the sectarian Druze and Alawi statelets—carved out by the French—into the Syrian republic over the next two years. An Alawi gathering in Tartus, on 25 February 1936, set in motion the process for winning the community's support for the nationalist cause, and a broad spectrum of Alawis voiced their support for the union.[69] While the Tartus gathering set the tone for the political integration of the Alawis into Syrian society, the meetings of their religious leaders that followed thereafter[70] marked the beginnings of their social integration as well.[71] The impetus for these meetings was the French High Commissioner's declaration that the Alawis were an independent community distinct from the Sunnis, Shi'as, Isma'ilis and Druze. This was perceived as serving the purpose of the separatists and therefore several gatherings by Alawi religious leaders convened to affirm their affiliation to the Muslim community. As a result of these gatherings and pronouncements by Alawi religious leaders, the Mufti of Palestine, al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, a Sunni scholar who was also an ardent supporter of unification, issued a *fatwa* confirming that the Alawis were indeed Muslims and that they should be wholeheartedly accepted as such by every Muslim.[72] Both at a political and religious level, these events marked the beginnings of the social integration of the Alawi community into the fabric of a nascent society working its way towards independence and statehood.

In the religious sphere, the efforts of Alawi scholar 'Abd al-Rahman al-Khayr are of singular importance in redefining the Alawi community's religious identity, moving it away from its heterodox past and into the more acceptable fold of Shi'a Islam. Writing in 1937 and inspired by the re-awakening of the Alawi community, al-Khayr states:

> The Nuṣayrīs, as they were once called, and the 'Alawīs as they are called now in the period of the [French] occupation, are one of the Muslim sects ... They are Imamate Muslims and pure Arabs. For many reasons—mainly the pressure of some tyrannical rulers in the Islamic period—they took refuge in the mountains of this country. They used to practice their Islamic tenets with secrecy and in the meanwhile externally followed some of the religious rituals of the dominant forces in order to protect their

> communal identity ... This externalization introduced non-Muslim and alien rituals which became part of the customs adopted by their populace but rejected by their *khaṣṣa* [religious elite]. This is the reason for the suspicion ... and speculation about their faith ... We do not know exactly when these alien habits were [introduced] ... but we think that some of them were [introduced] during the Crusades.[73]

Whether cognisant of the importance of mainstream acceptance or inspired by the desire to strip Alawi beliefs and practices of foreign accretions, al-Khayr's writings set the tone for the Alawi scholars that came after him. Until his death in 1986, he continued to elaborate religious arguments that portrayed the Alawis as a genuine Muslim sect with a pure Arab pedigree.[74] Al-Khayr's efforts were reciprocated by the Shi'a religious establishment, and some of the works on Alawi religious matters written by scholars influenced by his ideas were prefaced by Shi'a luminaries like Sayid Muhsin at-Tabataba'i al-Hakim, Imam Musa as-Sadr and Muhammad Shams ad-Din.[75]

Nonetheless, the burden of centuries of marginalisation was not going to be simply erased by the mere prospect of integration and social acceptance. Separatist inclinations within the Alawi community were still prevalent, and were kept alive by the French as well, as can be seen in the tumultuous career of the early-twentieth-century Alawi leader, Sulayman al-Murshid.[76] Al-Murshid—the founder of the Murshidiyyun sect—came to prominence as a shepherd boy who claimed divine powers and launched a religious and political career spanning more than twenty years. In 1939 he instigated a rebellion with 5,000 of his followers and, armed with French weapons, resisted the authority of the Sunni-dominated nationalist government.[77] Al-Murshid remained opposed to integration and instigated a second uprising after Syrian independence in 1946, which was crushed by the national government, and he was executed.[78]

The newly born Syrian Arab Republic was described (justifiably, given the above) as being 'in many respects a state without being a nation-state, a political entity without being a political community'.[79] The process of integration and attempts to create a political community would involve socio-economic improvements, the modernisation of marginalised communities and society at large and the use of force.[80] Political infighting amongst the Sunni elite and the military's constant intervention in the political process made Syria's post-independence years extremely turbulent. The country's first democratically elected President, Shukri al-Quwwatli, spent barely three years in office before being ousted by the military in 1949, and a series of coups followed before a civilian parliamentary government once again resumed control in 1954.[81] In this period one major shortcoming of the Syrian state was the government's

failure to include a wider stratum within its system of electoral contestation; politics was still the preserve of the privileged few, aptly described by Raymond Hinnebusch as a 'liberal oligarchy'.[82]

In spite of all its problems, the post-independence years of 1946 and 1958 were a period of vitality and pluralism in which new middle-class political parties entered the fray.[83] The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood[84] and the Ba'ath Party[85] were established during this period and both would leave indelible marks upon the country's contemporary history. Under the leadership of Mustafa as-Siba'i, the Muslim Brotherhood became a strong proponent of parliamentary legitimacy and social justice.[86] As-Siba'i, who was a political pluralist who recognised the country's diversity, opposed one of the articles of the 1950 constitution that stated that Islam was the religion of the state, arguing instead for it to read that Islam was the religion of the head of state and that Islamic Law was a fundamental source of legislation. While his religiously conservative peers expressed scepticism of the secular Ba'ath Party, as-Siba'i was happy to enter into an alliance with the Socialist Ba'athist Akram al-Hawrani to defend the role of the state in wealth distribution and agricultural land reform.[87] This was of course before the Ba'ath Party's seizure of power in 1963, when it was a political movement with broadly based support within society.[88]

The nascent Ba'ath Party was instrumental in the Alawi community's rise to power.[89] Many Syrian religious minorities found the party appealing because it advocated a secular, socialist political system that promised them freedom from socio-economic discrimination and minority status.[90] Ba'athist ideology did not discriminate on the basis of religion and the Alawis and other minorities were granted unfettered party membership. Therefore, the party's disproportionate expansion in the Latakia region provided a strong base from which Alawi elites gained power in the 1950s.[91]

In the Alawi ascent to power, the Syrian Army was even more important than the Ba'ath Party.[92] Like the Ba'ath Party, the Army served as a means of upward social mobility for marginalised religious minorities and impoverished Syrians from the rural peripheries, who flocked to it in numbers far greater than their percentage of the population. Several factors contributed to the over-representation of Alawis in the Army. First, the French had encouraged minority recruitment to counter the nationalist tendencies of the Arab–Sunni majority;[93] second, minorities came from poor backgrounds and were attracted by the economic opportunities and social advancement offered by a career in the Army; and third, Sunni urban elites avoided military service and considered the Army a place for the socially undistinguished.[94]

The political crisis that began with independence reached a peak in 1958 and the Syrians sought redress by merging with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR). This experiment was a failure and Syria withdrew in 1961, paving the way for the Ba'ath revolution of 1963 which toppled the country's traditional pyramid of authority, and the previously dominant Sunni urban elite was brushed aside by a broad coalition of new political and social forces.[95] The hidden hand behind the Ba'athist revolution was a small collective of Army officers who referred to themselves as the Military Committee (*al-Lajnah al-'Askariyyah*), most of whom were from religious minority backgrounds. One of its founding members was destined to shape the future of the country and would dominate its politics for more than thirty years, emerging as the architect of modern Syria; this individual was Hafez al-Asad, a young Alawi officer from the village of Qurdaha in the sect's mountainous heartland.[96]

The Alawi compromise—from stillborn democracy to dictatorship and minority rule

The Ba'ath seizure of power in 1963 that brought an end to the post-colonial Syrian state's very brief, intermittent and messy experiment with parliamentary politics was not a product of mass mobilisation from below, but rather a *coup* engineered by a handful of military officers, which in turn also faced fierce opposition across the whole spectrum of the politically active population, from Nasserites to Islamists and liberals.[97] Faksh argues compellingly that as intra-Ba'ath rivalry and intra-Army factionalism intensified, Alawi primordial loyalties became an important factor in political alignments. The community's circumstances had changed with the emergence of an educated, mobilised Alawi class with widespread prominence in the Army and the Ba'ath Party, creating a sense of oneness amongst them, or a 'communal clannishness', that was hitherto non-existent.[98] While the regime established by Salah Jadid in 1966 was also dominated by Alawis, Jadid attempted to move somewhat beyond Alawi or military support to entrench his rule and inadvertently weakened his support in both these spheres, making it relatively easy for the strong Alawi–military faction of Hafez al-Asad to depose him in 1970.[99]

Coming to power in November 1970, Hafez al-Asad single-mindedly constructed centres of power around Alawi sectarian groupings, especially in the Army, relying heavily on his officer faction, the core members of which were drawn from his immediate family and close relatives, extending to include members of his tribe and then others from the broader Alawi community.[100]

Non-Alawis were not entirely excluded and Sunni officials were also placed in high positions, such as Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass. Such individuals, however, exercised authority only in accordance with the president's policies and had no independent political constituencies backing them. Asad's Alawi factions at the centres of power reigned supreme and considerably diminished the chances of non-Alawis forming independent blocs capable of posing a significant threat to his regime.[101] Nikolaos Van Dam contends that the appointment of Sunni officers such as Tlass to such high posts may very well have been done to placate Sunnis and dispel the impression that senior positions were the exclusive preserve of the Alawis.[102]

In addition to sectarian solidarity, repression also played a central role in Asad's consolidation of power. The President created a '*Mukhabarat* state' in which multiple intelligence and security agencies watched the people, the Army and each other. Asad created two armies: the first made up of Praetorian Guard units recruited from his family and sect and charged with defending the regime; the second a professional army responsible for defending the country's borders.[103] The model of Syria under Asad is succinctly described by Zisser as 'that of a centralized regime of vast might—with, at its apex, a group of military officers of clear ethnic identity, and at its foundation "a broad coalition" of political and social forces representing broad sectors of the Syrian people who back the regime'.[104] Some scholars have noted the utility of the concept of 'populist authoritarianism' as a useful characterisation for understanding the regime that took shape under Asad, while others explained the stabilisation of the state by viewing it through the lens of neo-patrimonialism, emphasising how the regime consolidated power through the construction of clientele networks around the presidency.[105] None, however, dispute the centrality and absolute authority of the president. This is poignantly captured by one of Hafez al-Asad's biographers, who noted that by the 1980s—when Asad had firmly entrenched his authority—his 'preferred instrument of government was the telephone'.[106] Asad rarely attended meetings or saw ministers, but all were acutely aware of his presence and reach, affirmed every now and then by a 'disembodied voice on the telephone'.[107]

With Asad at the helm, Syria underwent a remarkable transformation after 1970. Over the course of the next three decades, the country was refashioned from a weak and unstable state into a regional player with standing and influence, making Asad one of the most prominent leaders in the Middle East.[108] Asad's ability to entrench and perpetuate minority Alawi rule over a sometimes very hostile Sunni majority for such an extended period was no less

impressive. Such a feat not only required an oppressive and authoritarian government structure, but also the ability of the regime to legitimise itself, primarily by decreasing the saliency of its distinct identity and building a unifying façade.[109] Asad's unifying ideology at the onset of his rule was secular pan-Arabism,[110] tempered by a unique leadership ability that combined ruthlessness with compromise and co-optation in dealing with enemies.[111] Asad also displayed a level of pragmatism that distinguished him from some of his more ideologically rigid Ba'athist colleagues whose short-sightedness was a source of major tensions in society. A case in point is that of a junior Ba'athist Army officer of Alawi origins, Ibrahim al-Khallas, who caused a major eruption in Damascus in April 1967 after publishing an article in a Syrian Army weekly magazine, arguing that the best way to promote Arab socialism was to confine belief in God, religion, capitalism, imperialism and all other values that had controlled society in the past to the museum of history.[112]

This incident occurred during the rule of Hafez al-Asad's predecessor, General Salah Jadid. Under Jadid's rule, the state campaigned against religion and belittled the traditions of Islam. A protest gathering was held in the Umayyad mosque against such policies, but Jadid clamped down mercilessly on the protesters. It was therefore not surprising to find that when Jadid and his supporters were challenged by Asad's military faction for the leadership of the country in the closing months of 1970, leading figures in the Muslim Brotherhood did not conceal their support for Asad.[113] Asad's rise to power ushered in a new era and he softened the anti-Islamic tone of his predecessors. He also prayed in Sunni mosques, went on pilgrimage to Mecca and had the Alawi religion declared a legitimate branch of Shi'a Islam.[114] In 1973, vociferous debate broke out in the country after the draft Syrian constitution excluded a clause that stipulated that Islam was the religion of the state. Asad intervened to calm tensions and added an amendment that stipulated that the religion of the president of the republic had to be Islam, affirming a position adopted in the 1950s by the founder of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Mustafa as-Siba'i.[115] Asad's Islamic credentials were then re-verified by a *fatwa* issued by one of his strategic allies, the influential Lebanese-based Iranian cleric, Imam Musa as-Sadr, who declared the Alawis to be Shi'a Muslims.[116]

For the secular and left-leaning Asad, religion was no more than a convenient tool for influencing politics and he always strove to utilise it to his advantage, sometimes with brutal effect. In the mid-1970s an extremist breakaway faction of the Muslim Brotherhood led by Marwan Hadid formed the Fighting Vanguard, which began a violent armed insurrection against the regime

culminating in the bloody massacre of Alawi cadets at an artillery school in Aleppo in 1979. Even though the Muslim Brotherhood distanced itself from the attack, Asad's Interior Minister General Adnan Dabbagh held the organisation directly responsible.[117] The Asad regime thus used the incident gradually to decimate the country's strongest and most well-organised political opposition group, culminating in the Hama massacre in 1982, which resulted in the complete removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from the Syrian political equation from that point onward, within the country at least.

Asad showed similar resolve in using force against the nascent Lebanese Shi'a Islamist group Hizballah; he was uncomfortable with the group's religious orientation and close relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. When Hizballah's growing influence threatened the secular Shi'a Amal group which Asad supported during the Lebanese civil war, the Syrians and Amal violently clamped down on the Islamist movement, killing its fighters and assassinating its leaders; the current Secretary-General, Hasan Nasrallah, only narrowly escaped death himself during this tense period.[118] When the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse in the early 1990s, Asad travelled to Iran to strengthen his alliance with Tehran, realising that Soviet decline meant that he would have to rely more on regional allies.[119] This visit also paved the way for reconciliation with Hizballah and the development of a long-standing alliance that persevered with dramatic effect under his son, Bashar al-Asad.

In the decade before his death, Asad also reconciled with political Islam and practically abandoned pan-Arabism as the mainstay of Syria's foreign policy, in line with the rise of the Islamic factor in inter-Arab relations.[120] Apart from the regime's strategic alliance with Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hizballah, Palestinian Sunni Islamist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad also found a safe haven in Syria. Hafez al-Asad was therefore able to maintain his regime's broad-based appeal by foregrounding its commitment to Arab concerns—whether secular or Islamist—while keeping the issue of minority rule subtly beyond the broader gaze of outside observers. There is no denying that under Hafez al-Asad the lot of the Alawi community improved tremendously; they held strong positions in the Army, the security services, the professions, the party, and indeed in every institution across the land. Their advancement still, however, offended many Syrians, who believed the sect was being unduly favoured, but significantly now only a narrow sector within Syrian society held their heterodox beliefs against them.[121] The bitter compromise struck by the Alawi community with the Asad regime was the acceptance of dictatorship in return for social mobility. While they had indeed made great advances

in the modern era, the Alawis were no less despised due to the actions of a regime that spoke in their name.

The Alawi dilemma and the search for a common Syrian identity

When Hafez al-Asad died on 10 June 2000, he bequeathed the country to his eldest living son Bashar, and with it the deeply-rooted repressive state apparatus that he had so carefully built. Despite early speculation that a power struggle was taking place in Syria, the transition from father to son was remarkably smooth and the party and Army elite closed ranks, ratifying the process initiated by Hafez al-Asad to establish his son as his successor.[122] Bashar al-Asad fashioned his image as a moderniser who saw reform as a gradual process and strove to win over the younger generation of Syrians without raising the concerns of the older generation, and thereby came to represent both continuity and change.[123]

Whereas the three decades of Ba'athist rule under Asad senior could in some respects be seen as a necessary stage that left Syria with a stronger state that had broken down class and communal cleavages while producing a more diversified economy, the transition to Asad junior was by no means the dawn of democracy. As Hinnebusch explains, the political and economic liberalisation instituted by Bashar amounted to a mere decompression of authoritarian controls and greater access for the bourgeoisie to decision-makers; the regime's legitimisation of pluralism was really envisioned as a substitute for democratisation and not as its precursor.[124] As such, the 2001 Damascus Spring—the brief mobilisation calling for the institution of democracy—was quickly nipped in the bud,[125] even if the role of the security forces under Bashar al-Asad was at this stage much less obtrusive than before.

In essence, Bashar's rule was very much the perpetuation of the system of governance that was established by his father, embellished with a modernising tweak. The 'populist authoritarianism' of Hafez, alluded to above, became the 'modernising authoritarianism' of Bashar, which according to Volker Perthes was an attempt to make the system work better so that it could survive and deliver development.[126] Ultimately, Syria's fate—under both Asads—was inextricably tied to regional and international struggles in good part outside their control.[127] Nonetheless, the regime's strong commitment to an Arab nationalist identity and its consistent opposition to Israel and American imperialism all contributed to maintaining internal cohesion. These positions resonated with the Syrian street and the Arab masses in general, providing the regime

with far more insulation against internal opposition than was the case with other Arab countries.

In spite of this, and contrary to what Bashar al-Asad believed,[128] at the onset of the Arab Spring in December 2010—January 2011, Syria's foreign policy stance and cosmetic domestic reforms were not enough to save it from the protest movement that spread across the region, as a new generation of Arab youth took to the streets demanding political agency and the right to determine their own destinies. Starting in the southern Dar'a province, the protest movement spread across Syria and as the regime's reform façade collapsed it quickly resorted to repression, a posture with which the Syrian people were all too familiar but by which they were no longer universally intimidated. Unable to quell the uprising with force and unwilling to reform, Bashar al-Asad was powerless to stop the country from spiralling into a brutal civil war.[129] Syria became a battleground for regional and international players seeking to assert their influence and, in a twist of historical irony, it was the Shi'a Islamic Republic of Iran and its Lebanese Islamist proxy Hizballah that came to the rescue of the secular Ba'athist regime, joining the fray to keep Asad in power.

Conclusion

The twentieth century marked a decisive turning point in the history of the Alawi community in Syria. After centuries of isolation and persecution, the people of the mountain began the descent from their sanctum into a world that had changed fundamentally. In religious terms, the Alawi community has made major strides by re-integrating into the broader socio-religious fabric of Syrian society through asserting its mainstream Shi'a affiliation. Those within the community who are disinclined towards any religious affiliation have found a place in the secular spaces of society. Politically, however, the Alawi community as a whole has been hamstrung by its association with the ruling Asad clan, which has exploited religious identity to entrench autocratic rule. However, in the current context, political identity is a far more important site of struggle, and equal citizenship, freedom of belief, association and expression are aspirations that have come to define the modern social imaginary and can no longer be suppressed.[130] As these values are increasingly embraced, the Alawis of Syria find themselves once again on the threshold of yet another transformation.

2

THE ALAWIS IN THE OTTOMAN PERIOD

Stefan Winter

The increasing confessionalisation of the civil conflict in Syria has sparked a renewed, though largely superficial, interest in the history of the Alawi community, the religious minority from which Bashar al-Asad and many key figures of the Syrian regime and military leadership hail. Whether in Western or the Arab Gulf media, hardly any report on Syria today fails to specify that Alawism is an 'offshoot' of mainstream Twelver Shi'ism, considered beyond the pale by many Muslim scholars, and that the entire community as such has therefore been 'historically persecuted'. According to this meta-narrative, which is also shared by a good number of academics, the sect was able to hold out against constant oppression by taking refuge in the mountains of northwestern Syria, emerging only in the French Mandate period to take on a lead role in the Army and the Ba'ath Party, finally 'capturing power' in 1966/70. The secrecy, self-defence and clannishness of the persecuted minority would thus help explain the current regime's nature. Ironically, the regime itself has recently begun to play on this view and stoke fears among the Alawi and other sectarian communities of the Sunni majority's unbridled historical hatred: referring to the medieval scholar whose *fatwa* called for the elimination of the

Alawis and has therefore often been portrayed as summing up their actual experience under Muslim rule, Bahar Kimyongür has aptly described the community as labouring under a perpetual 'Ibn Taymiyya syndrome'.[1]

The problem with the notion of 'historical persecution' and other such blanket assessments is that they are not borne out by the historical evidence. Surprisingly, there has in fact been very little research done on the Alawi community in the period immediately preceding its modern rise to prominence, during the four centuries of Ottoman rule over Syria (1516–1918). Part of the reason is the general tendency in modern nationalist historiography to dismiss the entire Ottoman period as one of illegitimate foreign occupation that merely serves to backlight the more heroic story of emerging Syrian or Arab nationhood. Perhaps a bigger part of the reason, however, has been historians' over-reliance on theological and narrative texts which, by their very nature, concentrate attention on the Alawis' divergent religious identity rather than on their integration within wider Syrian and Ottoman society. The purpose of the following contribution is therefore to reassess the situation of the Alawis in the early modern era from an Ottoman administrative standpoint. In the contemporary literature it has become commonplace to hear that the Alawis were not recognised as a religious community, that their testimony was not admitted in Islamic courts, and that they were so poor as to sell their daughters into slavery to rich bourgeois families in Latakia and elsewhere. Drawing on archival records from both Istanbul and the provincial capital of Tripoli, however, this chapter will attempt to show that 1) the Ottoman authorities did indeed recognise the Alawi community as a distinct tax-paying group; 2) that Alawi individuals made extensive use of the Ottoman court system; and 3) that the rise of tobacco farming saw the emergence of an Ottoman-sponsored indigenous landed gentry under which the Alawi community achieved an unprecedented degree of autonomy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The taxation of the Alawi community

One of the most durable myths of Ottoman history is that religious minorities were organised in so-called *millet*s which enjoyed fiscal and legal autonomy within the empire. In fact, no such system ever existed: while individual communities were indeed sometimes mandated to collect taxes and practise traditional law among their members, the vast majority of Christian and Muslim subjects paid their taxes to Ottoman government agents or tax farmers and

took recourse when necessary to the imperial *shar'iyya* courts. It is therefore not surprising that the Alawis and other Shi'a denominations were not recognised as an independent corporation either. So long as they did not engage in overtly sectarian acts (such as calumniating the orthodox Sunni caliphs) they were legally assimilated to the empire's Muslim population.[2] Ibn Taymiyya's *fatwa* was never referenced by Ottoman jurists, and unlike the Kızılbaş (Kizilbash) Shi'as who actively revolted against Ottoman rule in Anatolia in the sixteenth century, the Alawis (Nusayris) and other quietist Shi'as were never the object of a formal condemnation.

That said, the early Ottoman tax cadastre registers known as the *Tahrir Defterleri* indicate that the state was acutely aware of the heterodox populations resident in north-western Syria, applying special charges to both the elders of the Isma'ili community and to Imamis (Twelver Shi'as) travelling from the Damascus area to the Shi'a shrine cities of Najaf and Kerbela. While these dues were eventually abolished, the Alawi community as a whole was subjected to a special tax known as the *dirhemü'r-rical* ('*dirhem* [piastre] on men') and recorded as such in all subsequent censuses. The *dirhem* was collected on a *per capita* basis and has therefore been likened to the *jizya* capitation tax on Christian and Jewish subjects.[3] This is indeed how the Ottoman accounting office came to consider the *dirhem*, but it is unclear if it was originally meant as a tax on non-Muslimness. The oldest tax census for the region, compiled in 1519 or almost immediately after the Ottoman conquest, requires payment from those villages where the *dirhem* had always been collected 'in the past' (*kadimü'l-eyyamdan*), but does not explicitly refer to the Alawis.[4] A revised tax code from Sultan Süleyman's period, however, then stipulates a more constraining policy:

> In the villages of [Tripoli] *sancak* there is a people known as Nusayris who do not fast or pray nor submit to Islamic law. In the old accounts register, a part of this faction was assessed a tax called the 'dirhem on men' in the amount of one each, and it was levied each year in accordance with the *defter*. Some of them were not assessed in the *defter* and they were not levied... It is my command that it be collected from all of them. On the basis of ancient custom [*kanun-ı kadim*], a piaster of 12 [copper] *para* each from the married men, and 6 each from the unmarried boys who can work and earn independently, is to be registered in the new *defter*.[5]

Despite the typical appeal to 'ancient custom' it therefore seems that the Ottomans were universalising a Mamluk-era tax that had only been levied on some Alawi villages (which may have been difficult to assess otherwise) and not on the sectarian community as a whole. In later tax registers the assess-

ment fluctuates somewhat but finally reaches a flat rate of 16,67 *para* for both married and unmarried men in 1645/46, though it is unclear how onerous an imposition this was. The *dirhem* was only one of several taxes levied on the Alawi rural population, alongside the standard *miri* agricultural tax and other charges, representing no more than half of most villages' assessments. In several cases it was even suspended when the authorities found the village to have suffered undue hardship.[6]

According to the Tahrir registers the *dirhem* was collected in two Alawi-inhabited districts (Hisn al-Akrad and Manasif) in the western part of the province of Homs and from fifteen districts (Safita, Tartus, Mi'ar, Qulay'a, Kahf, Khawabi, Qadmus, Marqab, Munayqa, 'Ulayqa, Jabala, Platanus, Latakia, Sahyun and Barza) in the province of Tripoli (later divided into two provinces, Tripoli and Jabala).

Dirhem charges do not appear to have been collected in the provinces of Hama, Safad (what is now northern Israel and the occupied Golan) or 'Ana (on the middle Euphrates), all of which still had Alawi populations at this time. The lists of villages attached to each district in north-western Syria, while not permitting the precise calculation of local populations, provide a general impression of the distribution of the Alawi community in the area,

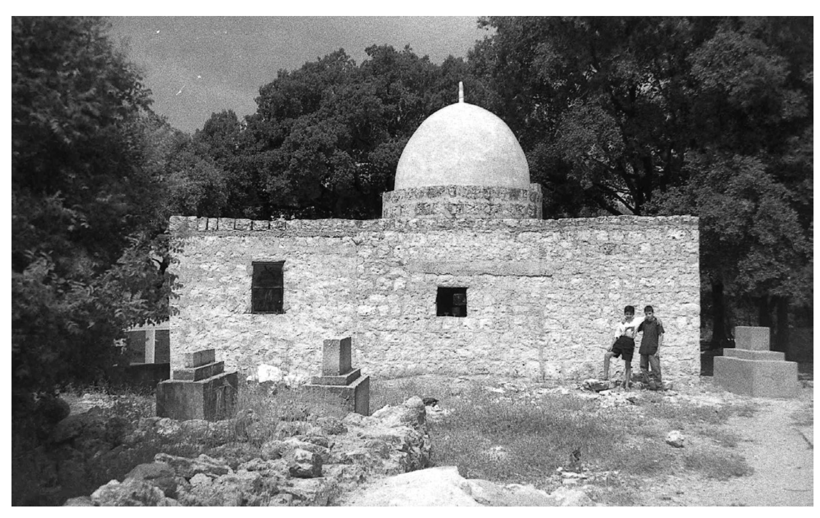


Fig. 2.1: Ottoman-period Alawi *maqam* (shrine) near al-Kahf (Photo by Stefan Winter, July 2001)

occupying anywhere from a handful of hamlets in the foothills immediately above Sunni-dominated coastal towns, such as Tartus and Baniyas, to the near totality of villages in the mountain district of Jabala.

Perhaps just as important, the Tahrirs occasionally provide some insight into local affairs. Several villages are noted in the 1519 register to be in a state of revolt under the leadership of the Kalbi tribe.[7] According to Samuel Lyde and other traditional accounts, the Kalbis were the most recent (and least reputable) of the Alawi tribes to establish themselves in the coastal highlands, and owed their domination over the region at least in part to the connivance of local Ottoman government officials.[8] While this is not directly corroborated in the Ottoman sources, beginning in the mid-sixteenth century the Kalbis are indeed noted to be 'in possession' (*tabi*) of several villages in the Jabala and Platanus districts, including ones that were previously in revolt but where the *dirhem* and other charges were now being levied.[9] Another twelve Alawi-inhabited villages in the Qurdaha area are noted at this time to have been under the authority of a certain 'Ibn Muhannad'.[10] Just as in other parts of the Syrian coastal range that were not amenable to direct control by government fief-holders or tax collectors, it appears the Ottomans did not hesitate to assign fiscal authority in the Alawi mountains to local notables regardless of their possible confessional affiliation.

The degree of the Ottomans' disinterest in religious distinctions is also suggested by the eventual disappearance of the *dirhem* or its subsumption under other charges. Specifically, the spread of *iltizam* tax-farming in western Syria and other parts of the empire beginning in the late sixteenth century meant that all dues from a given tax unit (*mukataa*) were combined into a single yearly lump-sum payment and the state no longer kept detailed accounts of individual tax types. It is unclear when exactly the *dirhem* stopped being levied as such. It is never itemised in tax-farming contracts of the time (to be discussed below), despite the fact that it continued to be invoked as a component of overall dues in the Latakia region in financial decrees for the province of Damascus (Şam-ı Şerif Ahkam Defterleri) as late as 1783.[11] Much as with the Christian capitation tax, the *dirhem* was finally only one of a whole panoply of charges at the authorities' disposal, which could be more or less of an imposition depending on the district assessed.

The Ottomans had no illusions as to the Alawis' religious identity, but were unwilling to take issue with it in the day-to-day administration of northwestern Syria. The state's dilemma between casting itself as a defender of orthodoxy and 'ancient tradition', or else simply maximising revenues, is bril-

liantly illustrated (and clearly resolved in favour of the latter) in a unique case regarding 'illegal' alcohol production in the Homs region in 1584. According to an order preserved in the 'registers of important state affairs' (Mühimme Defterleri):

> The mountains of Tripoli are mainly inhabited by the Nusayri faction, who are Shi'i heretics and are constantly bringing wine to sell and trade... [I]t is most advantageous in every respect for the state purse [*miri*] if these people are assessed the wine tax and pay the stamp tax and weighing taxes... [The sultan has] therefore decreed that, so long as this causes no harm to other tax farms... Nusayris bringing wine to sell be assessed, as per ancient custom, the wine tax, weighing taxes and the stamp tax in the province of Homs and other places indicated.[12]

Alawis in court

If most of the documentation we have for the Ottoman period is about the Alawis from a government or administrative perspective, we do have a number of documents that give voice to individual Alawi actors as well. In the absence of an actual Alawi narrative or biographical literature, which is perhaps only normal for an early modern rural hinterland society, the testimony regarding Alawis that has been preserved by the *shar'iyya* courts of Tripoli, and to a lesser extent Antioch, proves to be a particularly valuable source. These courts, as their name indicates, were 'law' (*shar'iyya*; legal) courts and not 'Islamic tribunals' (*shari'a*) as is often claimed, and in their actual functioning there was never any distinction made between religious, administrative (*kanun*) or traditional (*örf*) bases of jurisprudence. In practice, therefore, there was nothing that prevented Alawis (or any non-Muslims for that matter) from availing themselves of Ottoman justice. In the Hama records, as Dick Douwes has already indicated, there is regular evidence of Alawis' recourse to the court there.[13]

The vast majority of court documents dealing with Alawis refer to the concession of tax-farming contracts to Alawi notables, more on whom I discuss below. Most of these contracts are extremely formulaic and only preserve the contractor's voice to the extent that he swears to execute the *iltizam* faithfully and submit a pre-determined amount of taxes by the following March (the start of the Ottoman solar-fiscal year). Obviously none of these contracts referred to the tax farmer's confessional identity, even if it was well known to the members of the court or local administration and indeed attested in other documents. Already these contracts, however, can tell us something about the extent of some Alawi notable families' implication in area politics. In addition to the tax farmer himself, a member of his extended clan usually appeared

before the judge as a *kafil* or 'guarantor' of the contract, meaning that he and essentially the entire family could be made financially liable if ever it was not discharged. Furthermore, many tax farms contain a provision for one or more relatives of the contractor, usually a son or wife, to stay with the provincial governor as a security 'hostage' (*rahn*) until such time as the contract was paid in full. These hostages would reside either under the governor's direct supervision in the citadel of Tripoli, or later also in the Ottoman fortress on the island of Arwad (opposite Tartus), closer to the Alawi mountains.[14]

In many cases Alawi tax farmers also entered into business partnerships with other local notables to operate state tax concessions in the region. The district of Safita, for instance, for which we have the most documentation, was held by the Alawi Shamsin family for many years from the late seventeenth century onwards with either Sunni, Isma'ili or Christian associates, who would appear before the court in Tripoli personally or through an agent.[15] Beginning in 1740, however, we see the Shamsins increasingly engaging in such partnerships within their extended family, to the point that up to eight individual members of the Shamsins' main branch (the Shiblis) and associated in-laws in addition to a dozen local village sheikhs could be named as sharing responsibility, either as tax farmers, agents or guarantors, for the discharge of the *iltizam*.[16] Two of these in-law lineages, the Barakats and the Raslans, would become so powerful that the Ottomans split the district of Safita into three or four sub-districts or *hilla*s beginning around 1749, with the Raslan family eventually becoming one of the leading Alawi households in the entire region.[17]

Beyond the tax farming contracts, however, a number of these documents also specifically refer to Alawis as Alawis. The main concern of Ottoman government in the region was of course maintaining order. When 'Nusayris' or 'Kalbis' are mentioned in executive orders of the time, it is almost always in the context of banditry and brigandage. Even orders which identify the perpetrators thus, however, never label them as heretics, and in fact often denounce particular tribal leaders for exploiting the Alawi populace and 'leading them astray', suggesting that the imperial state viewed Alawi brigandage above all as a social problem.[18] The court records, on the other hand, deal with individual subjects whose confessional identity could be made an issue. In a murder case from 1724, for example, the accused appeared in court and supposedly 'confirmed of his own free will that his father is of the Nusayri faction' before offering a full confession that is cited in the first person in the proceedings. The formulation suggests that the judge made a point of noting his identity while deflecting any possible religious condemnation from him personally

Fig. 2.2: Tax farm contract for the district of Safita to Darwish ibn al-Shibli (Shamsin), April 1729. Qasr Nawfal, Tripoli: Tripoli Court Records 5:18

(since it is only his father who is confirmed to be an Alawi). In any event, his identity does not seem to have had any effect on the result. In the end it was left up to the deputy governor, since the victim had no known relatives, whether to demand blood money or execution.[19] Another time, a man who had been brought to court by the *muqaddam* (headman) of Safita for his failure to pay taxes in the district won the case by arguing that he was really from Tripoli and that 'he is Sunni, whereas the community and people of Safita are Nusayri'.[20] In all such cases one may surmise that the Alawis were put at a disadvantage by their confessional identity; however, this is never formalised in the actual legal proceedings.

We in fact have only one court case where an Alawi was clearly discriminated against on the basis of his identity. This particular case is registered in the court records of Antioch, where Alawis from the region of Latakia had only just begun to immigrate in the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1735, a certain ʿAli ibn Muhammad Rayhan was accused of having pierced the walls and broken into the plaintiff's house in the village of Mızraklı in the early morning hours some days before, and of having 'illegally taken a nightcap off of my wife's head, two measures of wheat, two of millet, and other things'. Asked to corroborate the evidence, two witnesses summoned from Antioch confirmed that the said ʿAli ibn Muhammad was not only a habitual criminal but also that he was 'of the Nusayri faction', and 'using gross words and obscene expressions, has insulted and calumniated the religion, the faith and the four venerable caliphs in our presence'. Though somewhat dubious (it is unlikely that an Alawi would curse the fourth caliph) this was apparently at least as important as the crime for which he was actually on trial, and on the basis of a *fatwa* solicited from a local mufti he was ordered to be put to death.[21]

This case remains unique, however, and must be weighed against others where the court unequivocally sided with Alawis against Sunnis. In 1667, for example, a group of notables from Safita bore witness to the fact that a group of Hazur Türkmen and their captain had attacked and robbed the Shamsins' palace.[22] In 1724, Darwish ibn Shibli Shamsin successfully sued an agent of Rustum ibn Hasan, the powerful Kurdish *agha* who controlled the entire northern hinterland between Latakia and Antioch in this period, for tax moneys he had failed to remit for the Safita district.[23] Most strikingly, perhaps, at this same trial (which lasted for over a week and saw a dozen different accusations brought against Rustum Agha) the Shillif family of Bahluliyya appeared in court to complain that Rustum Agha had murdered Muhammad Shillif ten years previously. The Shillifs were the leading Alawi tax farmers in the northern coastland, well-known to the Ottoman authorities and not infrequently denounced as 'Nusayris' whenever they became overly rapacious in their tax-collecting activities or attacked other villages. In this case, however, Muhammad's son ʿAli testified that his father had been invited as a guest to Rustum Agha's palace where he was treacherously strangled—testimony corroborated by three 'righteous men from among the Muslims of Latakia'. For this and his other crimes the hated Sunni *agha* was in fact then executed, and the Shillif family awarded damages.[24]

Ottoman–Alawi notables

Powerful families such as the Shamsins and Shillifs obviously had a degree of influence with the local administration and judicature that ordinary Alawis did not. Only in this, Alawi society was once again not so very different from other sectors of provincial society in the empire, which by the eighteenth century had increasingly come to be dominated by its own class of local notables (*ayan*) serving as Ottoman government intermediaries. In north-western Syria, the rise of the *ayan* was largely the result of the development of tobacco farming, which saw the growth of Latakia into a major commercial centre in the eighteenth century and provided employment for numerous Alawis and other peasant communities in the region.[25] Much like the Rustum Aghas themselves, the Shillifs appear to have had extensive investments in tobacco agriculture and owed their wealth both to the favour that Latakia's signature 'Abu Riha' tobacco was finding in international markets and to the expansion of the Alawi community throughout the coastal highlands. In 1754, for example, Mahfuz Shillif and his commercial partners were accused of demanding ever higher taxes from peasants who had come looking for farmland in their district;[26] by the nineteenth century the entire northern Sahyun in the mountains east of Latakia had come to be called the 'Bayt al-Shillif'.

The administrative and economic context of the age of the *ayan* in fact appears to have favoured what may be called the 'tribalisation' of Alawi society, in the sense that the tribes into which many Alawis consider their society to have been historically divided only began to play a role—and are mentioned in the sources for the first time—in this period. The Muhalaba, for instance, whom traditional accounts consider to have been among the oldest of all Alawi tribes, are first noted as constituting their own *iltizam* in 1754, around the same time that the ancient citadel of Platanus (just to the north of Qurdaha), which served as their base, came to be known as the Qal'at al-Muhalaba.[27]

Similarly, the Banu 'Ali, who are often associated with the Muhalaba and considered the main rivals of the Kalbis in the region, now appear either as a separate tax farm or as the lords of the new 'Samt al-Qibli' (southern district) of the Kalbiyyun mountains.[28] This is not to say that named groups such as the Kalbis, Muhalaba and Banu 'Ali did not already play some sort of role in the social organisation of the Alawi community beforehand. Their sudden appearance in the administrative sources of the eighteenth century, however, suggests that they finally owed much of their real importance to the particular conditions of Ottoman decentralised rule in this period.



Fig. 2.3: Ruins of Muhalaba castle, Jabala district. Photo by Stefan Winter, April 2011

In addition to the increasing stretches of territory and castles which leading notable families and newly minted 'tribal' leaders controlled in the mountains, our sources also occasionally provide some indication of their personal wealth. The Shamsins, as already noted, owned a mansion (*saray*) in Safita, which was guarded by armed retainers and which they used to store large amounts of silk and livestock they had taken from the local peasants as taxes in kind.[29] Muhammad Shillif, for his part, in addition to his properties also had a large immediate family that included four wives, one of whom was apparently the daughter of the Isma'ili emir of Qadmus. Three of his sons, furthermore, served as *muqaddam*s (headmen) in the area.[30] At the turn of the nineteenth century, Saqr ibn Mahfuz al-Shibli Shamsin was so powerful that he occasionally provided assistance to the Lebanese Shihabi emirs in their struggle against the infamous Ottoman governor of Sidon, Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar.[31] Still later, in September 1827, the Tripoli court registers record that 'the altruistic Shamsin family' set aside a large amount of money to construct a mosque in Barmana village near Safita—perhaps in an effort to offset criticism of their sect's perceived disinterest in orthodox worship.[32]

The Alawi notables' standing of course did not spare them conflict with the local authorities. For much of the early nineteenth century, the likes of Saqr Mahfuz were nearly constantly at war with Berber Mustafa Agha, the tyrannical deputy governor of of Tripoli and Latakia; in 1808, the Raslans led a victorious assault on the Ismai'li castle of Masyaf, marking perhaps the historical high point of Alawi feudal power in the coastal mountain region, before being beaten back by government troops. And while ordinary Alawis no doubt suffered from the chaos and anarchy attending the decline of Ottoman control over the Syrian periphery, as well as from the increasing enmity of neighbouring communities (as exemplified by the radically anti-Alawi writings of the Latakia-based religious scholar Muhammad al-Maghribi),[33] the leading Alawi notable families nevertheless remained committed to the imperial state to which they ultimately owed their position. In 1832, it need only be recalled, Saqr's son Zahir Mahfuz al-Shibli and his forces seconded the Ottoman army in a last-ditch effort to ward off Ibrahim Pasha's invasion of Tripoli province; over the next years, the Alawi highlanders of Latakia were seen as the single best chance to break the Egyptian occupation and restore Ottoman sovereignty in the region.[34]

Conclusion and further outlook

The modernising reforms of the nineteenth century subjected the Alawis of Syria to new political and economic pressures, but also opened new vistas before them. Many Alawis chose or were forced to leave the impoverished coastal mountains and migrate to Egypt, Antioch, or further to Adana, Tarsus and Istanbul; in doing so, some found employment and success at the highest levels of the Ottoman military and government. During the Tanzimat, the reign of Abdülhamid II and the Young Turk era, the state deployed sometimes heavy means to conscript and convert the Alawi populace of Syria, but also saw to the construction of schools and other infrastructures throughout the region.[35] Finally, with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, of course, the Alawis were promoted to proto-national sect in one territory, the French Mandate of Syria and the 'État des Alaouites', while being subjected to radical assimilationist policies in another the new Turkish Republic of Mustafa Kemal and the CHP.[36]

The diversity of the Alawi experience under Ottoman rule, as reflected in Ottoman archival sources, ultimately calls into question many of the essentialist clichés conveyed in oral traditions and narrative historiography. From the

beginning of the Ottoman occupation in the early sixteenth century, both imperial chancery documents and provincial court registers suggest a consistently pragmatic, utilitarian approach on the part of the state toward the heterodox Alawi population of Syria. Even if the authorities generally equated Alawism with disobedience and brigandage, the fact that the Alawi population was subject to specific taxes nevertheless denotes a recognition of the community *per se*. While in Ottoman legal and political discourse Alawism or other non-Sunni confessions could not be 'tolerated' in the modern sense, the fact is that Alawis had full access to Ottoman jurisprudence and were not evidently discriminated against. Finally, if the great mass of Alawi peasants were—just like the rest of the Empire's rural population—poor, powerless and oppressed, occasionally perhaps to the point of having to lease their children into virtual slavery to bourgeois families in the city, this does not mean that Alawi society was not just as stratified itself, with a new class of notables and tribal leaders reigning almost unchallenged starting in the eighteenth century. The rapid economic development of the Latakia region, the demographic expansion and northward shift of the Alawi community, and the rise of the Bayt al-Shillif, the Shamsins, the Muhalaba and the Kalbi factions (from the last of which the Asad family is derived) all originated in the context of Ottoman sovereignty over Syria.

If nothing else, this diversity of lived experiences should put to rest the notion that the Alawis' situation under Ottoman rule was primarily and fundamentally defined by persecution. While relations between the Alawis, other communities and various government actors were not infrequently strained or marked by confessionalist invective, the Ottoman documentation simply does not support the claim that the state followed a systematic policy against non-Sunni sects as such. Predicated on a myopic over-reliance on religious and narrative literature, this has become a too-convenient myth for today's media, orientalist scholarship and Asad-regime advocates alike. Fortunately, however, it is no longer universally accepted. In one of the bravest novels to come out of Syria in the years just before the revolt, Fadi Azzam's Druze hero 'Saloum' takes the local Ba'th Party leadership to task for constantly claiming that the Muslim majority forever wants to:

> turn Syria into an Islamic state, and they're going to wipe out all the esoteric sects because that's what their draconian authorities, such as Ibn Taymiyya [...] have always told them to do. They have a long history of suppressing the esoteric sects, which made great progress compared to the underdevelopment of classical Islam... It was sectarian scare-mongering dressed up as Marxist critique, and Saloum couldn't take the [bs.] any longer...[37]

A more nuanced, evidence-based appreciation of both the rights and wrongs of Alawi history in the long period of Ottoman rule, let us remark in closing, should constitute a key step toward not taking it any longer.

3

COMMUNITY, SECT, NATION

COLONIAL AND SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSES ON THE ALAWIS IN SYRIA DURING THE MANDATE AND EARLY INDEPENDENCE PERIODS

Max Weiss

As the popular uprising against authoritarian rule that broke out in Syria in March 2011 decomposed into an intractable and devastating military conflict, media discourse on the subject has been saturated with 'expert' commentary on sectarianism, minorities and the spectre of inevitable partition. Sectarianism is (mis)taken to be the crux of the Syrian conflict; it is to be understood as the only solid element of Syrian identity; and it looms over all struggles for politics, society and culture in modern Syria. Intellectual engagements with the modern Middle East have long been animated by similar concerns, but now more than ever is the time for sober scholarly analysis of the place of the sectarian in the making of modern and contemporary Syria.

This chapter is primarily concerned with Orientalist, colonial and travellers' accounts of the Alawi community during the Mandate and early independence periods. Such engagements with the *pays des Alaouites* have been shot through with a range of reductive classifications and conceptualisations.

Historians of the modern Middle East have long been concerned with the politics of identity, community and sect. The history of modern Syria remains bound up with the problematic of minorities and sectarianism. In order to understand the struggles to describe, understand and master both categories and practices of minority and sect in the context of modern Syria, this chapter surveys the discourses on the Alawi community during the French Mandate and early independence periods.

Scholarly discussion of sectarianism in modern Syria may run the risk of reifying sectarian identities, practices and modes of imagination. This liability, however, should not obviate the imperative to think through the significance of particular events, individuals and moments in modern Syrian history as well as to call into question nationalist, sectarianist, communitarian and other forms of historiographical, political and intellectual discourse that touch upon issues pertaining to the sectarian. The point of such critical analysis would be neither to reproduce uncritically earlier 'mosaicist' or 'sectarianist' approaches to the study of modern Syria—indeed, it is precisely such methodological lenses that have obfuscated some of the country's most interesting and complex historical realities—nor simply to reduce Syrians to their ascriptive sectarian affiliations. One may hope that broader engagement with the genealogies of sectarianism in modern Syria may yet contribute to a more capacious and less conflictual understanding of Syrian difference and diversity.

In order to understand the struggles to describe, understand and master both categories and practices of minority and sect in the context of modern Syria—and precisely not to re-inscribe sectarian or communitarian narratives of Syrian society and history—this chapter considers French colonial and social scientific discourses on the Alawi community. As long as one takes into account the particularities of the history, theology and culture of the Alawi community, this mode of engagement with and representation of a minority community in the modern Middle East by foreign travellers, scholars and observers is far from unique. Indeed, as long as there has been interest in 'the Orient' there has been discourse about its minorities and its sectarianism. At the same time, as it might be put somewhat more optimistically, the history of the modern Middle East remains bound up with the problematic of diversity and difference. But are 'minorities and sectarianism' good conceptual frames to think with? To what extent is it useful or even responsible to view the Middle East region—its past, present and foreseeable futures—through such an analytic lens? Moreover, scholars of the modern Middle East continue to find creative ways to go beyond reductive conceptions of minorities and sectarian-

ism, whether primordialist or constructivist. Are all 'minorities' created equal, or are some more equal than others? Considering these and other such questions that inform the making of minorities and sectarianism as legible constructs and categories in the modern Middle East requires a double vision. On the one hand, historians may return to moments in Middle East history that shed light on how concepts, administrative frameworks, political practices and cultural understandings of minority and sect have been established and remade over time; on the other hand, scholars must also recognise the wide variety of fundamental transformations in the culture, politics and social dynamics of minority-hood and sectarianisms in the experience of modernity in the Middle East.[1]

The mosaic is an old trope—one might call it foundational—in Middle East studies. While religious diversity has been a hallmark of the Levant for millennia, the historical fate of the region's diverse religious communities in the modern period (as at other points in time) has varied widely. By no means is this the first attempt to draw attention to the inadequacy of the mosaic concept for explaining the history of modern Syria. But since modern Syrian identity is more complicated—precisely because of the intrinsic ethnic, sectarian and religious diversity of Syrian society—it would be helpful to make a critical analysis of the mosaic model, or what might be called the mosaicist approach, in order to index discourses that represent Syrian society, culture and history in terms of irreducible essences.[2]

Elements of identity such as religion or ethnicity have often been taken to be reducible in the cauldron of social engineering, which in the modern Arab world has tended toward the nationalist, the secularist, or some mash-up of the two. While the melting pot metaphor is typically related to the history of the modernising national state, it occasionally (albeit rarely) comes up in discussions of modern Syria. It might prove useful for historians to think about the extent to which the concept of the melting pot belongs, in some way, to the secular modern, particularly in colonial and post-colonial settings. The melting pot concept has been deployed by secularists—indeed, by none other than Syrian President Bashar al-Asad—in order to forward a particular notion of the nation—its boundaries, members and history—as well as threats to its constitution from within and without. The history of the nation and its others in the post-World War I Middle East has also been read against the 'appearance' or enhanced publicity of certain ethnic and sectarian groups, often referred to as 'minorities'.[3] By the same token, of course, secularists are not the only dwellers in the secular modern: 'The specific practices, sensibilities, and

attitudes that under gird secularism as a national arrangement—that give it solidity and support—remain largely unexplored, and yet it is these elements that shape the concepts of civil liberty and social tolerance.'[4] To be sure, Islamists in Syria have also used the language of the 'melting pot', albeit in different ways and to other ends.

The emergence of multiple forms of nationalism in the early-twentieth-century Middle East has attracted a disproportionate share of attention from historians and social scientists. An almost obsessive focus on negative capabilities, however, tends to re-inscribe a vision of (failed) national states riven by religious, ethnic and sectarian enmity that might be written off as artificial. It would be absurd not to recognise the flaws and limitations of states, nations and nationalisms, including the challenges of the religious and the lure of the sectarian. From the *millet* system and other strategies for dealing with difference under the Ottomans, to the French Mandate strategy of divide and rule, up until the contradictory secularism of post-independence and Ba'athist regimes during the mid- to late-twentieth century, struggles over identity and difference, be they religious, sectarian, ethnic or tribal, have been at the heart of the making of modern Syria. Scholars interested in matters of diversity and difference in Middle Eastern societies must, however, continue to think through and beyond the reductive logic of the mosaic model, the self-fulfilling prophecies of the literature on pressure cookers and 'deeply divided societies', and the Liberal optimism of the melting pot. Nations, states and societies often have to deal with difference amid dynamic social, political and administrative circumstances. In the case of diverse societies in the Middle East and elsewhere, 'communities' that have a long experience of mutual sociability, if not always the same administrative boundaries, must find the best means to manage multiple forms of difference.[5] The making of modern Syria is no exception, and the problematic of the sectarian and its others—nation, community and society writ large—in modern Syria still requires careful analysis on the part of historians.

By the outbreak of World War I, the French had amassed substantial experience in dealing with difference in colonial situations, particularly in North and West Africa.[6] As the French elaborated on the *politique des races* and other modes of religious differentiation, developed over the course of nearly a century of aggression and adventuring in North Africa, some communities in the lands of greater Syria—now defined as sociologically distinct religious blocs—would receive disproportionate attention from the Mandate administration. Beyond the long-standing relationship linking France to certain

Christian communities in the Levant (primarily the Maronite Catholics), heterodox Islamic minorities such as the Imami Shi'a, Druze, Isma'ilis and Alawis also received preferential (or, at least, differential) treatment in comparison with Syria's Sunni Muslims, who constituted upwards of 70 percent of the population. Drawing boundaries around sects and between religious communities, however, was no less an intellectual project than a political and administrative enterprise.

The fate of sectarianism may be tracked through the division of Syria into new statelets or cantons in the French Mandate period. Although the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon was formalised in 1920, the French confronted political and military challenges during the 1918–24 period, indeed, throughout the period of Mandate rule. In 1924 when Mandate Syria was 're-organised' into four provinces—the State of Damascus, the State of Aleppo, an Alawi state, and a Druze state—French prowess at divide and rule was famously brought to bear on the Alawi community in the north-west. To be sure, 'the Alawi community' is no monolith, and one could trace the sectarian in Syria otherwise.[7] The remainder of this chapter considers some of the ways in which the Alawi community fits into the history of the religious and the sectarian in modern Syria; in a sense, how the Alawi trajectory has become emblematic of 'history of religions' in modern Syria writ large.

In July 1925, when Ernest Schoeffler (1877–1952), governor of the Alawite state between 1925 and its dissolution in 1936, arrived in Latakia, a medium-sized port city along the Mediterranean coastline, he had just come off a tour of duty in Rabat, Morocco. Along with a handful of 'ambitious yet short sighted' (in the words of one historian) associates, Schoeffler would spend the next several years meeting with notables and *shuyukh* (singular *sheikh*) from the coast and the rugged mountainous interior in order to establish a local *conseil representatif*.[8] Indeed, the ensuing years of Mandate rule would consist of piecemeal attempts to streamline an administrative apparatus that had already begun to institutionalise Alawi difference within the context of a federation of Syrian states under French tutelage.

In the administration of the Alawi territories, Schoeffler was preceded by Colonel Niéger, Gaston Henri Gustave Billotte and Léon Henri Charles de Cayla, who went on to become High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon. Within the bureaucratic structure of the Mandate, the governor of the Alawi territory would report directly to the High Commissioner in Beirut, who in turn corresponded regularly with the French government in Paris and the Society of the League of Nations in Geneva. An autonomous local administra-

tion established in 1920 set the Alawi territory apart from the lands of Greater Syria and Anatolia. Two years later, state-sponsored law courts—based upon a corpus of 'Alawi' positive law—with jurisdiction independent of the national system based in Damascus, opened and new administrative councils at the district and provincial levels appeared as well. The *État des Alaouites* was created in 1924. The word '*Alaouite*', French geographer Jacques Weulersse (1905–46) noted, 'is the French transcription of the Arabic word *'Alaouiyin*, which simply means partisans of Ali. Its usage is a recent one. Until just before the Great War, the common name was Nosairi, which they also still use to describe themselves.'[9] Although Weulersse did not sharply distinguish the Alawis from Twelver (Imami) Shi'as, eventually the former was to be granted official status by the French in terms of adjudicating matters of personal status law. This seemingly obscure shift was part of a broader process of communal empowerment that had profound consequences for the history of Syria and for the region. Such 'collaboration' with the French would come back to haunt many people, particularly in the unforgiving discourse of Syrianist and Ba'athist nationalism. There were, however, more sympathetic analyses: one historian allowed that Alawis who had survived multiple 'catastrophes' over the preceding centuries believed that cooperation with the French would guide them to safety, a kind of desperation he likened to 'a drowning man clutching an oar'.[10]

When the Jesuit traveller Jean-Émile Janot 'discovered' the Alawi mountain (Jabal Ansarïeh) in the early 1930s he was hardly sanguine about its prospects for economic, political and moral development. 'The Alaouite works little, because he has few needs,' Janot quipped. 'The Alaouite, let us not forget, is a peasant. And everywhere the peasant is a little bit *quant à soi*, probably because he doesn't have very much to go around.'[11] As he grew more familiar with its inhabitants, though, Janot became convinced that the entire 'race' of Alawis could be profitably converted to Catholicism. Even if inculcating Christianity was never an indispensable component of the French civilising mission in Greater Syria, surely there would be no harm if Mandate rule could help those wayward races find their way to the truth.[12] 'How will the emancipation that has just begun in this mysterious mountain evolve?' Janot mused. 'The problem is posed. The solution is, to a large extent, in the hands of men.'[13] The question remained, however, which men would take up the task?

Although the modern political history of the Alawi community has received some attention from historians, much of this work has, however, been fixated on the nature of Ba'athist Syria qua 'Alawi regime'.[14] The Nusayri-

Alawis in greater Syria and Iraq during the medieval and early modern periods are currently the subject of fascinating research[15] with a spate of studies beginning to shed light on the community in the shadow of Ottoman rule during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[16] Further, more contemporary work has shed important light on the relationship between the Alawi community and the mid-twentieth-century Ba'athist coups and the social transformations in Syria during the late-twentieth century.[17]

With the exception of a handful of dissertations and scholarly articles, however, the Mandate and early independence periods—foundational moments in the making of the modern history of the Alawi community in Syria—have been relatively neglected by historians. Sulayman al-Adhani's 'The Sulaymanian First Fruits Revealing the Secrets of the Nusayri Religion' was one of the earliest accounts of the Nusayri community published in greater Syria and can also be understood as the first account of the Nusayriyya as a religious community.[18] Although the manuscript was lost, the treatise inspired another influential work by Reverend Samuel Lyde.[19] In 1924 Muhammad Ghalib al-Tawil published *Tarikh al-'Alawiyyin (The History of the Alawis)*, perhaps the first history of the Alawi community from the classical period down to the turn of the twentieth century, albeit one that is not without controversy[20] as subsequent Alawi scholars fiercely rejected what they perceived to be a lack of critical perspective in the book.[21] Some have argued that it was the first published reference to the community as Alawi as opposed to Nusayri.[22]

In his magisterial description of *Le Pays des Alaouites*, Weulersse argued that 'the Alawite country is therefore neither a mere fantasy of the ethnographer nor is it a conventional formation: it is a physical and human natural unity, a living geographical reality'.[23] In addition to studying at the École normale supérieure, travelling widely in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, and subsequently holding posts at the Institut français de Damas, at the Faculté d'Aix-Marseille and in French West Africa, Weulersse published extensively on the geography, culture and society of the Levant and West Africa.[24] He notes how significant it was that in 1920, the French had set 'the Alawites'—as the region's inhabitants would come to be called in government-speak—apart from the 'cadre des États du Levant sous Mandat français,' which over the following decade and a half would be known successively as an 'autonomous territory', the État des Alaouites, the Gouvernement de Lattaquié and, eventually, the *muhafaza* (province) of Latakia within the framework of the Syrian republic.[25] The impact of Weulersse's work on the study of Syria in France was so profound that one Syrian doctoral student dedicated his thesis to Weulersse, 'who introduced Syria to the Syrians.'[26]

Like the functionalist social scientists of his day, Weulersse was partial to a certain geographical and even ethnic determinism. 'Although it is situated on one of the busiest seas in the world and at the heart of the ancient world, le Pays Alaouite actually remained outside the mainstream of modern life.'[27] If geography proved crucial to French understanding of the region far beyond the remote Alawi countryside, Weulersse helped to fix certain tropes regarding this marginal and obscure people. 'Isolated in their mountain and their heresy, the Alawites truly live on the edge of the civilized world.'[28] Racially identifying and sociologically dis-articulating the constituent elements of Syrian and Lebanese society were French pastimes, and Weulersse was no exception, sparking the revival of old wives' tales—'the legend of Alawites descending from the Crusaders', for example, which was 'born of the fact that among the Alawites of the mountains, some have blue eyes and blond hair. Aided by the imagination, it has even been said that this type is particularly well-attested in the vicinity of French châteaux.'[29] On the other hand, the cutting edge of social science was brought to bear on questions of race. 'The only claim that we can afford with respect to race is that multiple types are represented in the area: the classic type of Bedouin Arab, tall, thin, lean, with dark skin, raven-black eyes and hair; the characteristic Nordic type, with fair complexion, blue eyes and blond hair; the mongoloid type finally, with a flat face, slanted eyes and high cheekbones; and in between, naturally, every imaginable combination.'[30] What this physiognomic register should be taken to mean in terms of social practice or everyday life was never specified, but Weulersse, among others, did not hesitate to comment on the broader context of social life in the Alawi territory. 'In fact,' he wrote, 'few people in Syria have morals as simple and pure: prostitution and homosexuality are unknown; the Alawite gets married very young. Venereal diseases are nonexistent. Distance, poverty and religion come together to protect the Alawite against urban vices. Even theft and violence are rare occurrences in normal times. The Alawite people are uncouth but wholesome.'[31]

Weulersse was consistent in his characterization of Syrian society along ethnological lines as well as his political justifications for French domination of the *pays des Alaouites*. 'Unfortunately the political problem was more difficult to resolve than the military problem,' he lamented. 'By creating the autonomous territory of the Alaouites, the French Government had opted for a politics of minority (*une politique minoritaire*), consistent with both the traditions of France in the Levant, based on the protection of Christian minorities, and the spirit of the Mandate.'[32] A stalwart geographer, Weulersse

was not inclined to separate matters of policy and politics from the geographical and the social. 'It should be noted now that this policy was not merely ideological; it rested primarily on an undeniable ethnographic reality and in some respects was neither contrary to geography nor history.'[33] This commitment to 'ethnographic reality' allowed him to convert the bedrock of geography into the seductive elixir of modern liberal politics. There is 'this sentiment we call patriotism' in the West where, Weulersse argued, 'it is difficult to separate the nation from the state'. Political matters are otherwise in the East.

Here, on the contrary, the state appears as a higher and distant power, completely foreign to the country in fact. This was true in the days of the sovereignty of the Sultan; it has remained the case under the Mandate; and it will be the same under the Nationalist Government in Damascus. The state, for the locals (*les gens du pays*), is the 'unavoidable evil'; one resigns oneself to it and all one wishes for is to be content that it is the 'lesser evil'.[34] Weulersse is quick to point out that this antipathy toward centralised authority is not born of some 'modern' individualist streak, stemming instead here from the rampant hostility that divides one 'community' from another. The 'main role' of the state, its 'raison d'être, is to keep the peace among various rival groups. Here, more than anywhere else, the gendarme is the very incarnation of the State.'[35] Often when Orientalists and other foreign commentators suggest that Middle Eastern societies require a strong governing authority, whether a powerful military or a tyrannical dictator, the justification is not only the weak constitution of the governed, but also these societies' irrepressible religious, ethnic or sectarian hatreds.

Scholarly and ethnographic interest in the Nusayri–Alawi territory endured after Weulersse. Munir Mushabik Mousa wrote the most sophisticated analysis of the community ever to be published. His doctoral thesis at La Sorbonne, a two-volume doorstop, was supervised by Raymond Aron, a titan in the pantheon of French sociology, with Henry Corbin and Louis Massignon, no mere scholarly mortals themselves, and Jamal Saliba, an under-appreciated Syrian intellectual and professor of philosophy at Damascus University, filling out the supporting cast. Massignon was the only member of his committee to have studied and written on the Alawi community.[36] 'What facilitated my task,' writes Mousa, showing off his status as a native informant, 'was my deep knowledge of 'Alawites, because I was born in their country,' proudly announcing that 'they were my classmates and they are among my best friends in Syria.' Consequently, he claimed, this privileged access allowed him to analyse 'their festivals, their ceremonies, and to be familiar with their customs, manners,

morale, social constitution, prejudices, distrust, their sincere nature, their "anguished" soul, their misery'.[37] Mousa rejected the ethnological conclusions of Orientalists such as Ernest Renan and René Dussaud, arguing that the term Nusayri was neither a corruption of the Arabic word for Christian nor a reference to a pre-Christian people in the lands of Syria. Rather, in what is now the general consensus, he pointed out that the term Nusayriyya is derived from Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, the eponymous ninth-century 'founder of the sect' who hailed from the mountains of what is now Iraqi Kurdistan.[38] Mousa calls into question reductive scholarly depictions of the community and, further, sheds light on the historicity of sectarian theological critique. For example, he cites manuscripts from as early as the eleventh century that malign tawdry sexual ritual practices (wife-swapping, group sex, etc.) that were claimed to be essential Alawi habits, indicative of a generally loathsome Alawi morality.[39]

In as much as Nusayri–Alawis lived in relative obscurity until the end of Ottoman rule, the twentieth century had a far greater impact on the community. 'World War I destroyed many 'Alawites,' Mousa notes, 'who died of hunger, misery and the consequences of war. They plundered and ruined neighboring villages and towns of Christians, Sunnis and Isma'ilis in search of bread and food for their families.'[40] The Mandate period was crucial for their empowerment and mobilisation, as the Alawis were simultaneously produced as a national minority and a sectarian community. Although Mousa may overstate the extent to which the French 'liberated' a variety of 'discontented and persecuted minorities' who 'welcomed the French Mandate with joy' and 'saw in France the savior who would deliver them from their tormentor',[41] it seems incontrovertible that the Mandate period was a turning point in the history of this community as well as the categories and practices of minority and sect.

French policies may have offered Alawites isolated in their mountain a favourable occasion to 'come out of their shell',[42] but sectarian community is not destiny. The path of the sectarian in modern Syria—its political, institutional and affective registers—follow no fixed course. Barely a decade after national independence, Mousa notes, 'Alawites are active members of the independent Syrian state. They have the same rights and are subject to the same obligations as all other Syrians: equality, fraternity, justice, mutuality and social cohesion.' The net result for the Alawis, as well as 'other minorities that were isolated', is embodied in 'the idea of nationalism, national unity and living together (*l'union*) in the same country, with the same ideas, the same ideals, and under the same flag! Hence we see, clearly, that years ago the 'Alawites started to leave behind the solitude and the darkness for the world

of civilisation, enlightenment and freedom!'[43] Here was an optimistic republican take on the conditions of possibility for development and progress in the Alawi heartland. Neither the staid mosaic nor the unstable pressure cooker adequately explained the place of the Alawi community in mid-twentieth-century Syria. The Syrian melting pot seemed rather viable.

Mousa was not alone among French and French-educated scholars—in anthropology, sociology and geography—who sought to shed light on this mysterious mountain. In an apparent reference to the unchanging social character of the region, Weulersse had called *le pays Alaouite* 'a veritable fossil [of a] country'.[44] Massignon recycled this phrase in describing the social and religious state of the region, arguing that 'Nusayrism', by then a fairly archaic term itself, had been 'a fossilized cadaver for ten centuries'.[45] In his analysis of the Jabal Ansarïeh (Ansariyya mountain), geographer Etienne de Vaumas portrayed the region as endlessly split between the mountain and the coast.[46] His argument was that little had changed in the region between the late Ottoman and Mandate periods, and that there was hardly any social transformation in the first decade and a half of independence either. Consequently, both 'the ['Alawi and Isma'ili] communities living there are completely folded in on themselves'. The region was an ideal type of 'mountain refuge', an 'extraordinary prototype'[47] of the Levantine mosaic and its 'compact minorities'. As opposed to neighbouring Lebanon, though, where 'external relations' (with France, one can only assume) 'worked in a protective sense', in north-west Syria, 'cut off from the rest of the world', this isolation 'acted as a conservatory for a society condemned to a kind of decay which albeit slow was no less certain'.[48] The region, de Vaumas concludes, 'appears not only to be a poor country, very little favoured by nature, but also as the sociologically fossilised country (*le pays sociologiquement fossilé*) of which Weulersse had spoken. In the middle of the twentieth century, it perpetuates archaic ways of thinking and living that have marked its geography.'[49] Such declensionist narratives about the Middle East and its inhabitants were enduring features of French Orientalist and scholarly discourse throughout this period.

Without ever fully losing this geographical thread, de Vaumas makes broad sociological and political claims about the region and its inhabitants. There are some positive signs, in terms of 'the change of mentality, that is to say, the conception according to which people make their family, the ties that bind, their religious or moral beliefs, in a word, everything that conditions the social structure.... There is no doubt that this mentality is moving, albeit still not in such a visible manner.'[50] From here, a segmented model of Syrian society can

explain religious difference. 'Despite written constitutions and state law, Sunnis, Greek Orthodox, 'Alawis, Isma'ilis continue to be juxtaposed to one another and feel no real bond of solidarity. The sense of sociological kinship (*communion sociologique*) has no bearing on the Syrian national agenda, which is infinitely less important than the religious community, the tribe and the family.'[51] De Vaumas was not of the opinion that institutionalising separate domains of sectarian personal status law would be sufficient to tamp down on inter-sectarian disharmony; sceptical of law's power to manage, still less assuage, religious, tribal or other kinds of sociological difference, de Vaumas insists, 'it is this mentality that remains dominant everywhere, this sociological divide that continues to be the only real one'.[52] Despite glimmers of hope, then, his conclusion is pessimistic. 'How could it be otherwise after all?' de Vaumas laments.

> For thousands of years the East has never conceived that there could be a distinction between temporal and spiritual society, between church and state. Sect (*la confession*) is at once temporal community and ecclesiastical society; the concept of nation is a Western import that has never been assimilated except by a few very rare spirits who, despite their good intentions, are powerless to make it happen in reality.[53]

Beyond the unfounded conviction about the inseparability of religion and state in 'Eastern' civilisations, we find here the classic formulation that (traditional) sectarian difference is antithetical to (modern) national identity.

It bears reiterating that any discussion of sectarianism in modern Syria (and elsewhere) runs the risk of casually reifying sectarian identities, practices and modes of imagination. This liability, however, should not obviate the imperative to think through the historical significance of particular events, individuals and moments in modern Syrian history in order to call into question nationalist, sectarianist, communitarian and other forms of historiographical, political and intellectual discourse. The point of such critical analysis would be neither to valorise the 'mosaicist' or 'sectarianist' approach to the study of modern Syria—indeed, it is precisely such methodological lenses that have obfuscated some of the most interesting and complex historical realities there—nor simply to reduce individuals, communities or moments in modern Syrian history to their ascriptive sectarian affiliation. Rather, by putting 'sectarianist' discourses in their place, by situating them historically and critically, by tracing the edges of the anthropological and historiographical sounds and silences of sectarianism, historians and other social scientists may yet offer more satisfying accounts of the intellectual, political and religious history of Syrian society.

Indeed, even this cursory overview of Mandate-era engagements with the Alawi community in Syria and some of their legacies puts us not too far from Terry Burke's critical appraisal of French sociological approaches to North Africa when he wrote: 'Somehow a tradition [of sociological inquiry] that had begun with aspirations of bringing the fruits of the French Revolution to the lands of Islam had become an apologist for empire, a disseminator of racist stereotypes, and a producer of irrelevant folklore.'[54] If the mountains where Alawis lived were 'mysterious' to some, the definition and management of the religious in twentieth-century Syria proved comparably mystifying. As it happens, many Syrians have been keenly interested in the religious, the secular and the sectarian as well. How those interests intersected and continue to intersect with social, cultural and political forces will in large measure determine the range of possible futures in Syria and the region for some time to come.

PART II

ALAWIS AND THE SYRIAN STATE

4

'GO TO DAMASCUS, MY SON'

ALAWI DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS UNDER BA'ATH PARTY RULE

Fabrice Balanche

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Syrian Alawi community experienced significant geographic and social shifts, migrating from the marginalised Alawi stronghold in Syria's largely agrarian coastal mountain region to the capital Damascus where they came to dominate the country's ruling elite. While underdevelopment and demographic dynamism in the 1950s and 1960s arguably motivated and facilitated the Alawi community's rise to power, their demographic transition and social promotion were actually significant factors in weakening the Asad state. Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in the spring of 2011, President Bashar al-Asad struggled to restore hegemonic control over the state with the support of robust external allies, and this was in part due to the increasingly apparent demographic inadequacy of his support base, which has seen Syria fragment along sectarian and territorial lines. While former Syrian President Hafez al-Asad's regime benefited from the poverty of the Alawis, Bashar's rule has been weakened by the exclusive social promotion of the Alawi community during his tenure. Bashar suc-

ceeded in safeguarding his power due to the support of Russia and Iran, but at what cost to the Syrian state?[1]

Syria's shifting demographic realities are essential in understanding its civil war and indeed envisaging what a future Syrian state might look like. Bashar's regime and the Alawi community itself are the victims of the success of Hafez al-Asad's deliberate policy of communal favouritism. The objective of this policy was to empower a previously marginalised community and create cadres of Alawi men and women both loyal to and reliant on the regime and its apparatus, but in the long term this made the regime more fragile.

Asad's Alawi predicament lends itself to the political schema codified by Arab scholar Ibn Khaldoun during the Middle Ages, which Michel Seurat aptly drew upon in his analysis of the Syrian regime.[2] According to Khaldoun's theory of *'asabiyya:* a generation seizes power or '*mulk*' and constructs and institutionalises its rule. The following generation maintains and sustains power by living off of its predecessor's legacy. While the third and final generation in this cycle, corrupted by privilege and weakened by social promotion, loses power to the hands of a new *'asabiyya* (or cohesive group) moving into the centre from the periphery, motivated to fight with all they have to seize the *mulk*.

The once pervasive canopy of fear that enveloped the Syrian population has been perforated and torn apart by changing demographic realities, with vast numbers rising up against a ruling family supported by an ever-decreasing minority.[3] The Syrian civil war sharply brought into focus pre-existing communal cleavages in the country, especially between the Sunni majority and Syria's religious minorities (Alawis, Druze, Christian and Isma'ili). During the first days of the uprising, the media's lens was firmly fixed on the demonstrations in Dar'a (a 99 percent Sunni city) and the periphery of Damascus.[4] Sunni-led demonstrations were held throughout Syria,[5] even in the traditionally Alawi provinces of Latakia and Tartus. At this early point, when the 'revolution' was embryonic, some Christians and Alawis joined the demonstrations. Their participation however, was not accepted by the entire Sunni community, as evidenced by the sectarian slogans reportedly chanted against Syria's minority communities such as 'Send the Alawis to the grave and the Christians to Beirut!'[6] It was not simply the Alawi community's privileged socio-economic position that it stood to lose should Asad capitulate; more ominously, the threat of persecution by Sunni opposition groups[7] fuelled Alawi fears of ethnic cleansing from the outset,[8] reinforcing Asad's support base in his core constituency. To understand the demographic challenges the regime faces in

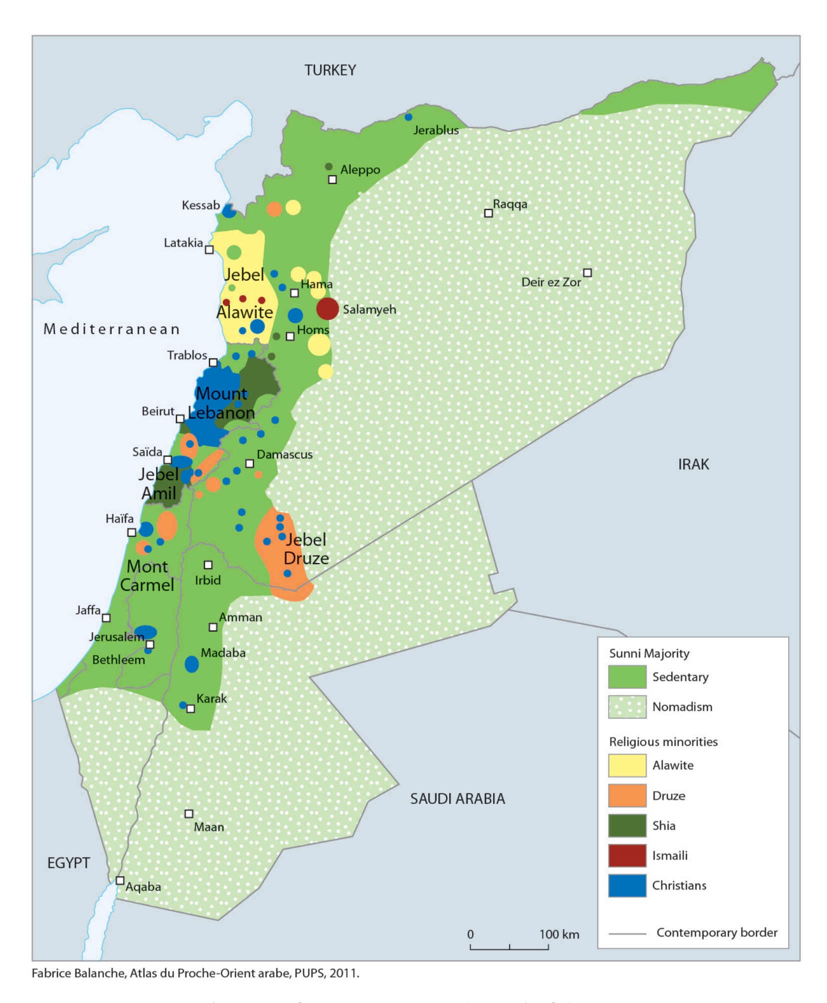
its struggle to maintain power in Syria, and just how much the Alawi community stands to lose if the insurrection is successful, it is important to examine the history of the Alawi community—from its persecution under Ottoman rule, territorial expansion during the French Mandate, and social promotion under the Ba'ath Party.

The 'Alawi state'

The Alawi community of Syria traditionally inhabited the country's western coastal region where it remained isolated until the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918 (Fig. 4.1). Ottoman rule prohibited what was viewed as a heterodox minority community from settling in strategic towns or urban centres. Institutionalised state persecution from the sixteenth century drove the Alawis to seek refuge in the mountains of Jabal Ansariya and its peripheral areas. At this time, the towns and villages that surrounded Jabal Ansariya were inhabited by Sunni Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Isma'ilis. The perfunctory road network which linked these areas, however, with only one access route cutting through Jabal Ansariya to its centre, effectively isolated the Alawi from their neighbouring communities.[9] In the mid-nineteenth century, when internal strife and dwindling resources drove these minority communities from the mountains, many settled on the margins of eastern Homs and the Hama steppe (Fig. 4.2).[10] Many poor and uneducated Alawis worked as tenant farmers on the large estates of the Sunni and Christian elites in the plains surrounding Jabal Ansariya and in the valleys of the Orontes.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, France administered Syria under the mandate system before granting independence in 1946. In 1920, against the backdrop of conflict between the Alawi and Sunni communities and growing Arab nationalist sentiment which was increasingly articulated in explicitly Sunni–Muslim terms, the French created an Alawite State along Syria's western 'Alawi Coast'. Their aim was to shield the Alawi community from a Syria dominated by Arab nationalist Sunni Muslims and emancipate it from the tutelage of Sunni feudalism.

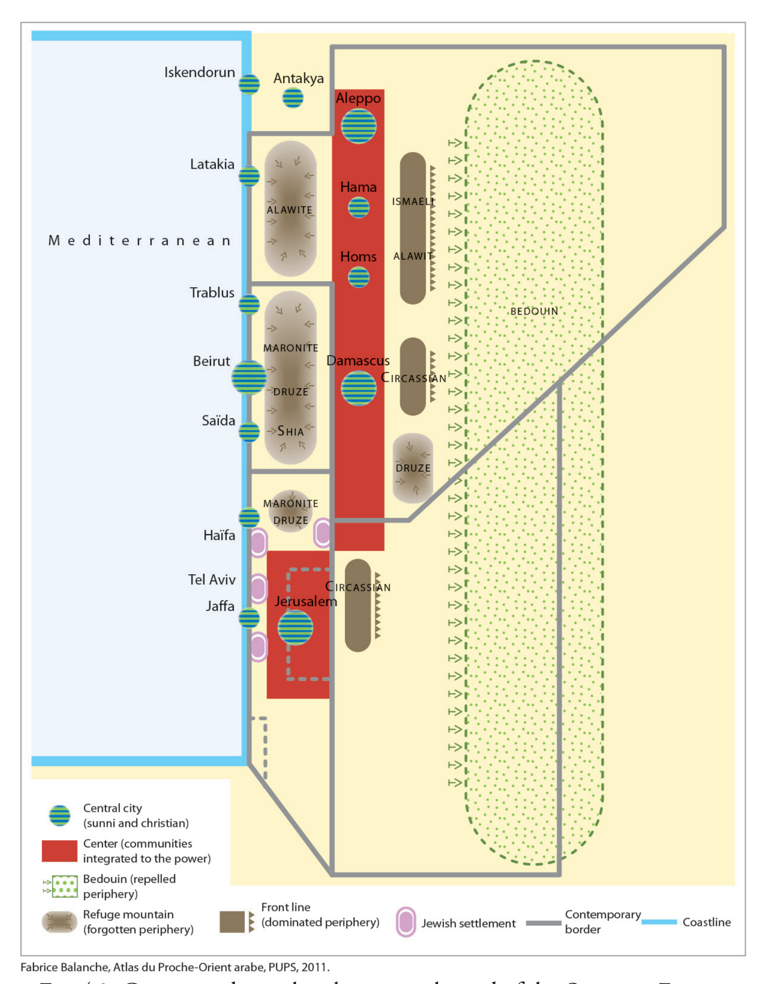
In theory, the geographic borders of the new Alawite state were drawn up to coincide with the demographic frontiers of the Alawi community. In practice, however, this principle was not upheld (Fig. 4.3). Rather, Sunni-majority territories including Baer and Bassit El Akkrad were integrated into the new state, while villages that were home to large Alawi landowning families found themselves outside these new borders. Moreover, despite great efforts by the



Fabrice Balanche, Atlas du Proche-Orient arabe, PUPS, 2011.

Fig. 4.1: Distribution of communities at the end of the Ottoman Empire

French to develop an education system in the new Alawi state to nurture an elite capable of leading a community, described by French geographer Jacques Weulersse as 'forgotten by history',[11] and despite Alawis constituting the vast majority of its population, political and economic power remained concentrated in the hands of the urban Sunni and Christian elites. The results of the 1935 census indicate low levels of urbanisation among Alawi communities within the Alawi state's coastal region. While Alawis made up two-thirds of

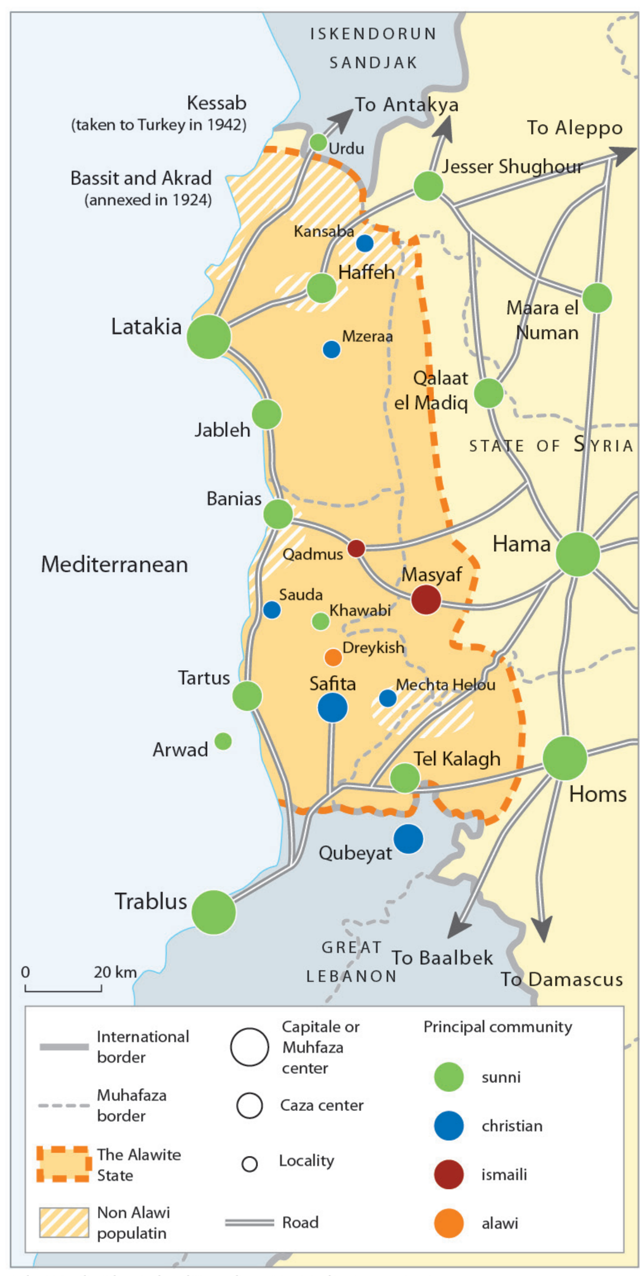


Fabrice Balanche, Atlas du Proche-Orient arabe, PUPS, 2011.

Fig. 4.2: Centres and peripheral zones at the end of the Ottoman Empire

the state's inhabitants, they constituted only three percent of its urban population. Weulersse noted that even within this state, Alawis were essentially absent from towns and urban centres altogether,[12] and by 1936 it was clear that the state-building project had failed and the Alawi state was reintegrated within the rest of Syria.

Over the next decade, the number of Alawis in the region's towns and urban centres grew significantly, with around 10 percent becoming urbanised (See



Fabrice Balanche, Atlas du Proche Orient arabe, PUPS, 2011.

Fig. 4.3: The Alawite state: 1920–36

Tables 1 and 2). Of the city of Latakia's 41,000 inhabitants, 63 percent were Sunni, 29 percent were Christian and 8 percent were Alawi.[13] At this time, over 80 percent of Syria's approximately 340,000 Alawis, who accounted for 11 percent of the population, were concentrated in the coastal mountain region. This region, roughly equating to the boundaries of the governorates of Latakia and Tartus today, was the heartland of the Alawi community, comprising a majority Alawi population (63.2 percent), a sizeable Sunni community (22.1 percent) and a smaller Christian community (13.6 percent).[14] Beyond the frontiers of this coastal region, the majority of Syria's Alawi population lived in a series of disconnected territories to the east of the Orontes, which included the towns of Mukharam al-Fuqani, Alyate, Jerbus, Sighuryn and Abu Mendel.

Table 1: The urban population in the Syrian coastal region in 1935 by religious community[15]

	Sunni		*Christian*		*Alawi*		*Total*
Town	*Population*	*%*	*Population*	*%*	*Population*	*%*	
Latakia	25,000	78.6	6,300	19.8	500	1.6	31,800
Jableh	6,073	96.8	81	1.3	116	1.9	6,270
Baniyas	1,671	77.5	350	16.2	136	6.3	2,157
Tartous	3,000	68.5	917	20.9	462	10.6	4,379
Arouad	3,300	99.8	6	0.2	0	0.0	3,306
Safita	40	1.3	2,716	89.5	280	9.2	3,036
Haffeh	911	70.8	360	28	15	1.2	1,286
Total	39,995	70.5	10,730	25.1	1509	4.4	52,234

Although Alawi urbanisation was well underway by the end of the mid-twentieth century, levels of poverty and severe underdevelopment persisted. A description of Ramel Shmali, an informal Alawi quarter founded in the north of the city of Latakia, highlights the low socio-economic position of the community at that time: 'No electricity, no water, no sewers, no municipal services, no medical care. Flies and gnats are as numerous as grains of sand.... Most of the inhabitants of the quarter are workmen or other proletarians; some belong to the middle class of public servants or merchants; 35 percent of the inhabitants live in their own houses.'[16] For the poor and illiterate Alawi communities of Jabal Ansariya,[17] the French Army of the Levant, which commissioned between 10,000 and 12,000 troops drawn largely from Syria's religious minority communities, was the path of choice to social and professional

advancement. That Alawis were over-represented in the French Colonial Army, and particularly in the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant* which formed the basis of the Syrian Army after independence in 1946, accounts in part for the disproportionately high number of Alawi officers in the Ba'ath Party's Military Committee after the 1963 *coup d'état*.[18] When Hafez al-Asad came to power in 1970, the over-representation of Alawi officers in the intelligence bureau and key military units was institutionalised, and this further expedited Alawi urbanisation and the migration of large numbers of Alawis from Jabal Ansariya towards the surrounding plains and eventually to Damascus.

Table 2: The urban population in the Syrian coastal region in 1947 by religious community[19]

	Sunni		*Christian*		*Alawi*		*Total*
Town	*Population*	*%*	*Population*	*%*	*Population*	*%*	
Latakia	26,000	63.4	11,800	28.8	3,200	7.8	41,000
Haffeh	1,730	72.1	610	25.4	60	2.5	2,400
Jableh	8,020	90.1	240	7.2	640	2.7	8,900
Baniyas	2,650	67.9	950	24.4	300	7.7	3,900
Tartous	4,500	50.6	1,730	19.4	2,670	30	8,900
Safita	40	0.7	4,880	86.5	720	12.8	5,640
Arouad	5,060	99.2	40	0.8	0	0.0	5,100
Total	48,000	63.4	20,250	27.5	7,590	9.1	75,840

The Alawis descend from the mountain

In 1963, the new Ba'ath Party government initiated a series of agrarian reforms across Syria, such as the drainage of the swampy floodplains around the Orontes, including in 1968 the Ghab plain and the irrigation of the surrounding land.[20] While the most notable achievement of these reforms was the construction of the Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates, a large number of lesser-capacity dams were also built in the coastal region on the banks of the Orontes. The resulting agrarian transition from the cultivation of cereals to irrigated mixed farming created significant job opportunities in the sparsely inhabited plains. This development saw thousands of Alawi families move from the villages of Jabal Ansariya[21] to the surrounding low-lying plains and to the Ghab valley and Akkar plain. Agricultural colonies were established to accommodate this migration, significantly swelling the Alawi population, and

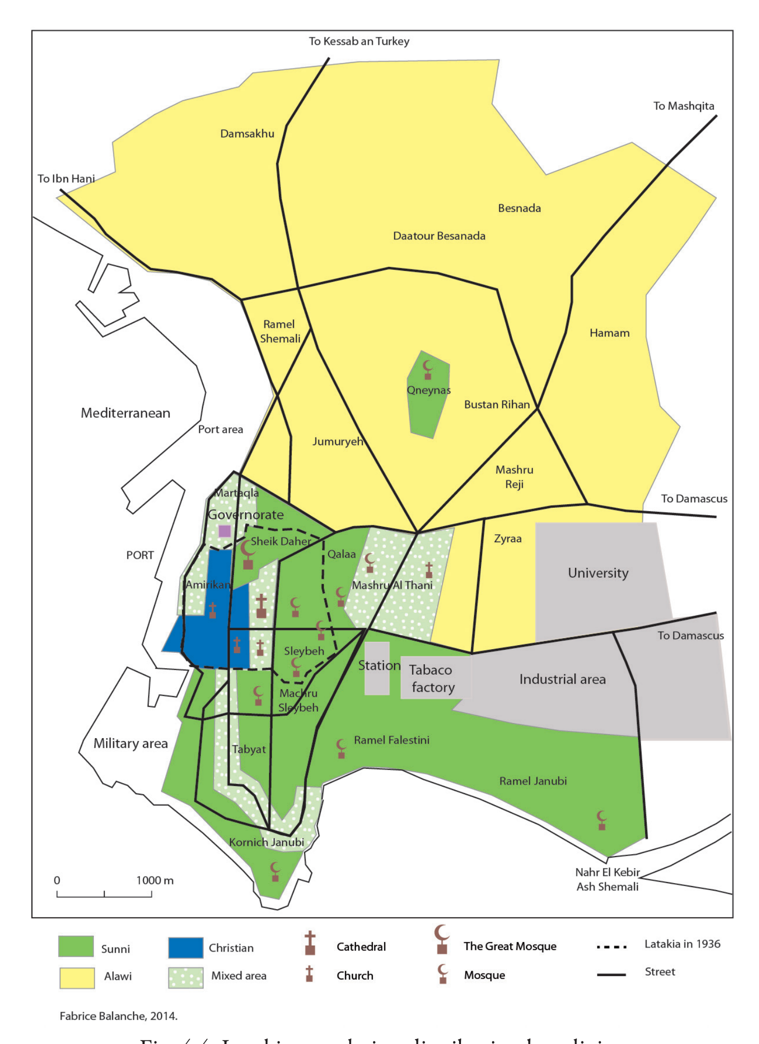


Fig. 4.4: Latakia population distribution by religion

transforming the periphery of Jabal Ansariya into an Alawi territory (see Figs. 4.5 and 4.6). The land reforms of the 1960s included the seizure and redistribution of large agricultural domains, from the hands of the predominantly Sunni or Christian urban elite to the Alawi population. The regime aimed to secure the support of the Alawi community by offering it concrete opportunities for development and social promotion. Moreover, it comple-

mented Hafez al-Asad's later strategy of undermining the Sunni Arab and Kurdish communities which inhabited these regions as they stood in opposition to his regime.

After 1963, when the rural exodus brought large numbers from the Jabal countryside to the urban centres of Latakia, the government launched an extensive collective housing construction project to cater for the influx of Alawi newcomers. Naturally, these initiatives were well received by the coastal Alawi community, encouraging its urbanisation and facilitating its alliance with the ruling Ba'ath Party.[22] The migrant Alawis established quarters to the south and east of Homs, including Zahra, Karm El Loz, El Armen and Karm Zeitoun,[23] and in the northern periphery of the towns and Alawi-majority villages of Latakia. Unprecedented Alawi numbers in these towns and urban centres dramatically altered the demographics of the coastal region, undermining the importance of the formally dominant Sunni and Orthodox Christian communities in favour of a more numerically significant and more densely concentrated Alawi community. New Alawi-majority areas like Besnada and Damsakho were subsequently integrated into the municipality of Latakia, extending its boundaries and further diluting its Sunni population. By the 1980s, Alawis were the majority community in the coastal towns of Latakia, Jableh, Baniyas and Tartus, and Syria's Mediterranean coast was effectively transformed into an Alawi territory, stretching east to west from the coast to the Ghab plain and north to south from Turkey to Lebanon. Where Alawi villages were once rural enclaves within majority-Sunni urban areas, by the 1990s, with the exception of Bassit, the opposite was the case: the villages of other communities found themselves enclaves within an expanding Alawi province.[24]

By 2010, Latakia's population had grown to over 400,000 of which approximately 50 percent were Alawis, 40 percent Sunni and 10 percent Christian. This demographic shift was also felt in Jableh and Baniyas, and similarly in the coastal city of Tartus, which experienced a tenfold population increase between 1960 and 2010, from only 15,000 to nearly 150,000 inhabitants[25] At approximately 80 percent of the population, Tartus has the highest percentage of Alawis of all Syria's cities, with the remainder split evenly between the Sunni and Christian communities. The city's promotion to the status of capital of the Tartus governorate,[26] the construction in 1974 of Syria's second largest international port[27] and the large-scale investment in and development of the city's tourist sector made this small Alawi-majority town the second largest urban centre in the coastal region, creating thousands of jobs and giving it genuine political and economic importance.

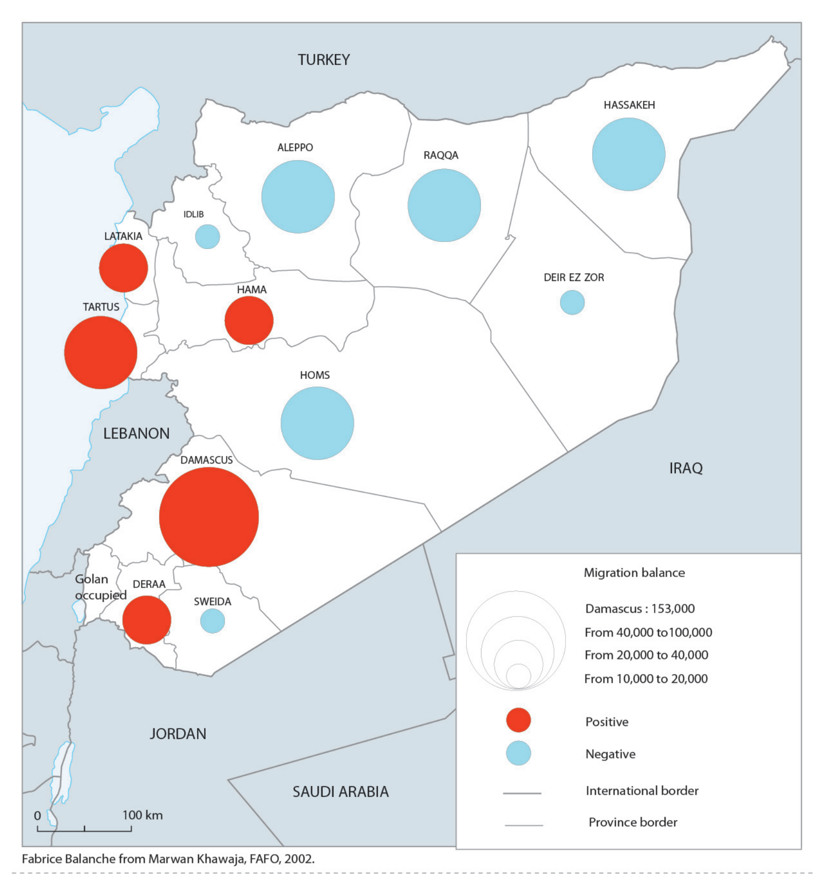


Fig. 4.5: Internal migration balance by province 1990–94

Go to Damascus, my son!

In 1945, Damascus was home to no more than 4,200 Alawis.[28] By 1980, although the Alawi community represented just 15 percent of the Syrian population, the regime had successfully expanded the Alawi presence through the installation of soldiers, civil servants and their families, not just in the coastal region, but in large strategic urban centres such as Latakia, Homs and Damascus, from which it had historically been absent.[29] During the preceding decades Alawis seeking employment in the expanding public sector flocked to the capital in their droves. A common *Shami* (Damascene) joke at the time

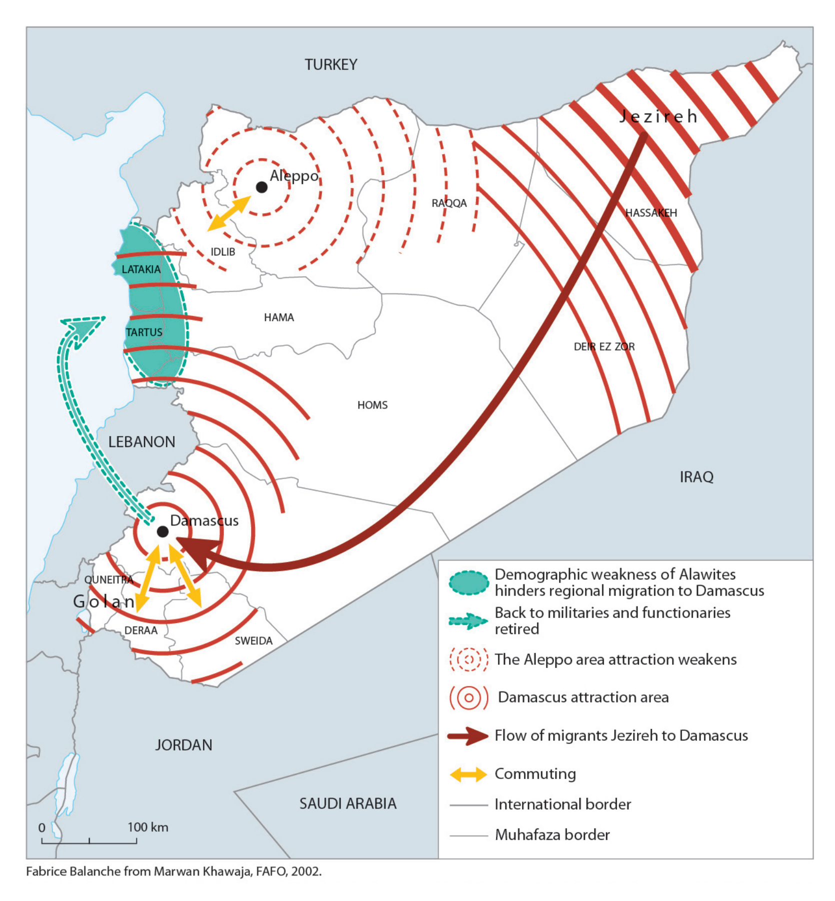


Fig. 4.6: Internal migrations in Syria since 1990

was: 'Why is the back of an Alawi boy's head flat? That is where their mothers slap them every morning and say: "Go to Damascus, my son!"'

In the Syrian capital today, the number of Alawis is now fast approaching half a million.[30] Hafez al-Asad reinforced his control over the capital by surrounding it with a ring of military installations and officer housing where Alawis, as they were over-represented in the army, made up the majority of the population. Hafez al-Asad famously said: 'He who controls Damascus controls Syria.'[31] This Alawi urban 'belt' around the city saw the emergence of informal Alawi-majority quarters such as Mezzeh. Military barracks were built near the presidential palace in the early 1980s and served as defensive urban

agglomerations, acting to cement the state's control over the city and inscribe Asad's power on its urban topography. Not all Alawis who migrated to Damascus, however, lived in this sort of military encampment. While Mezzeh and Abdalieh, which were constructed in the 1970s and 1980s, housed the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, Alawi regime loyalists mixed with the ordinary Damascene population in the northern and western suburbs of Jdaydeh, Artuz, Jeramana and Sahnaya (see Fig. 4.14). In these districts, the Alawis were more accepted by the Druze and Christian communities[32] than they were in the more conservative Sunni suburban neighbourhoods of Duma, Harasta or Daraya, which today form the strongholds of the Syrian opposition.

After the 1963 *coup*, Alawis holding positions of responsibility within the administration routinely appointed their co-religionists from neighbouring villages to the ministries and state agencies. Owing to the chronically low levels of education on the Alawi coast, the state administration typically drew from a pool of recruits that held no more than a certificate of basic high school education. This created a schism between the Alawi at the top and the bottom of the state bureaucracy, as new recruits were mostly employed in low-level civil service and security posts. To consolidate his control over the state, Hafez al-Asad recognised that he would require cadres of faithful and reliable Alawis across every stratum of the state apparatus. In order to ensure a steady flow of Alawis that were fit for this level of public service,[33] he expanded state education provision to minority communities that were traditionally isolated and marginalised.

As Alawi recruits swelled the ranks of the state apparatus, low-level posts became scarce and competition for employment in the public sector was fierce. Although a high school diploma or university degree became a prerequisite for entry, political connections remained invaluable. Given their privileged position under the Ba'ath administration, Alawis had a clear advantage in this regard.[34] Today, the Alawi community is inextricably linked with the state apparatus. The 2004 census indicated that of those in employment more than 80 percent of Alawis worked in the military, state-led industry or the public sector.[35]

In 1981, 39.5 percent of Latakia's working population was employed in the public sector with an upward trajectory in the early 1990s.[36] With large government recruitment drives largely targeting the Alawi community, and despite the fact that the Syrian economy was undergoing extensive liberalisation and privatisation, by 2006 this figure had risen to 56.6 percent.[37] That the principal beneficiaries of public sector growth were from the Alawi community can be

explained by the Syrian regime's neo-patrimonial character. Both Asad regimes exploited state resources in order to reinforce Alawi solidarity, or *'asabiyya*, ensuring that public sector employment was concentrated in the hands of the Alawi community and the regime's supporters were rewarded for their commitment to the state. The proportion of the working population employed in the civilian public sector was far greater in the governorates of Latakia (54.6 percent) and Tartus (39.5 percent) than the national average (26.9 percent).[38] Compared with other communities, Alawi are vastly over-represented in this sector. For example, of the male workforce in Latakia, 81 percent of Alawi work in the public sector compared to 57 percent of Christians and 44 percent of Sunnis.[39] This trend is replicated in Latakia's female workforce, with 35 percent of Alawi women working in the public sector compared to 23 percent of Christian women and only 15 percent of Sunni women.

Consolidating power, declining demographics: higher education and lower birth rates

The rapid urban development and increased social mobility that the Alawi community experienced under both Asads contributed to the emergence of a better educated, wealthy and politically influential class of Alawi citizens. Arguably, it came at a high cost, with the pauperisation and polarisation of Syria's rural Sunni populace and a dramatic decrease in Alawi birth rates and demographic figures. The link between higher education and lower fertility rates, while not an unusual trend globally, was worrying for a regime dependent on a minority Alawi core for its security and military personnel.

In terms of educational progress, the Alawi population's access to education was greatly improved by the establishment of primary and secondary schools in the coastal region.[40] In 1960, 60 percent of the Latakia population aged fifteen and over were illiterate, and this corresponded with the national average at the time.[41] By 2004, in Latakia and Tartus, illiteracy levels had fallen to 10.7 and 12.4 percent respectively,[42] and this was lower than the national average of 17.5 percent. Furthermore, the gender gap in literacy rates within the Alawi community had disappeared entirely.

Encouraging members of the Alawi community to pursue higher education, Hafez established a university in Latakia and enrolment figures grew. In 1981, the proportion of university degree holders in Latakia and Tartus was 1.8 and 2 percent respectively,[43] and by 2004 this figure had trebled with these cities ranking second and third on the national scale[44] at 6.3 percent and 5.9

percent respectively. The governorate of central Damascus was the only province with a higher percentage of university degree holders at 8.9 percent.[45] This progression was due in part to high levels of gender equality in the Alawi region, which translated into better access to university education for women. The rate of enrolment in higher education was actually superior among Alawi women[46] and they constituted 40 percent of university graduates in the Alawi region compared to the national average of 30 percent.

Over the last twenty years, as more and more women took up educational opportunities, Alawi fertility rates steadily declined and within two generations the average number of children per family had dropped from eight to two.[47] There was a clear correlation between higher levels of education and lower birth rates: women seeking a career tend to put off getting married until they have finished their studies, most commonly after the age of twenty-five. The fertility rates in the Alawi provinces of Latakia and Tartus were much lower than those in the Sunni-dominated interior. In less than fifty years, the Alawis emerged from the second phase of their demographic transition—the first phase corresponded with a fall in mortality rates in addition to a sustained high birth rate. Alawi birth rates collapsed due to the success of the disproportionately favourable development policies rolled out under Hafez. A second contributing factor lies with Alawi religious philosophy and the more secular liberal culture of non-initiated Alawis, rendering them more receptive to progress and change. Alawi women are subject to fewer social barriers and religious constraints than their more conservative Sunni counterparts and this allowed them to pursue education and employment opportunities, thus reducing Alawi birth rates.

Charting Syrian demographic growth during 1970–81 (the period in which Asad's development policies were most effective) tells a different story from the 1994–2004 period, when these policies were all but abandoned after the Alawi community achieved its demographic transition. In the 1970s the Alawi region had a demographic growth rate comparable to the national average, but by the 1990s Alawi growth had all but collapsed, mirroring the pattern in other minority–majority regions such as Sweida (Druze), Shahba, Salkhad, Salamyeh and Mukharam al Fuqani.

Results from the last census period (1994–2004) highlight a significant increase in the difference in demographic growth rates in Sunni and Alawi territories.[48] In the Sunni-majority districts, from Hama to Abu Kemal and the Hauran, demographic growth exceeded 3 percent a year; while growth in Alawi coastal districts, such as Tel Kalagh and Masyaf, was less than 2 percent

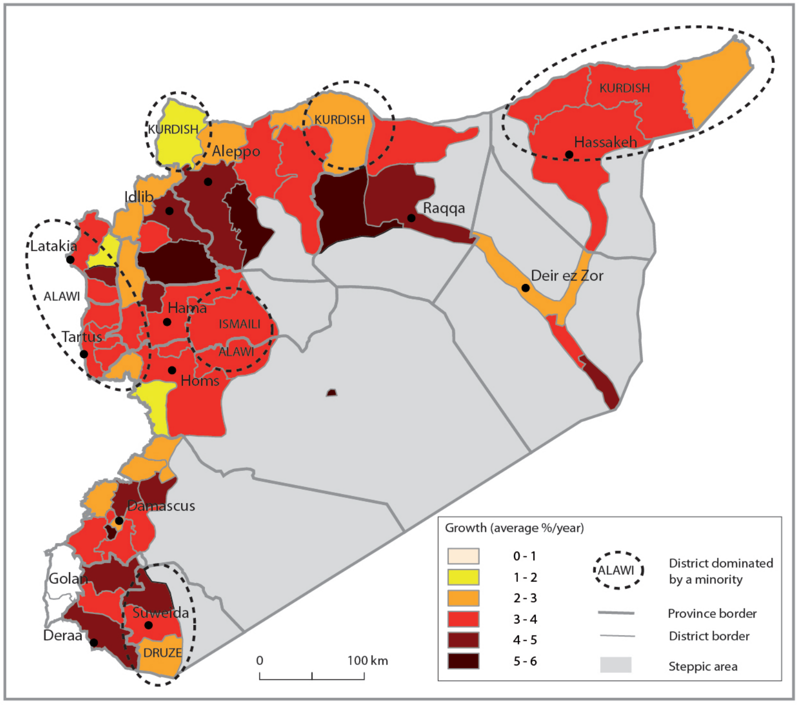


Fig. 4.7: Demographic growth in Syria by district, 1970–81

annually. That region still enjoyed a positive net migration rate before the civil war (for reasons which will be elaborated on below); its lower rate of demographic growth can be attributed to a lower Alawi birth rate than in Sunni-majority regions, where net migration levels were negative. At the provincial level, the ageing populations of Latakia and the mountain districts of Tartus experienced the most significant reduction in demographic growth levels since, from the 1960s, the young adults of Jabal were drawn en masse to neighbouring coastal towns and the Syrian capital by greater employment opportunities. On the other hand, the coastal districts were able to maintain a demographic growth rate of between 2 and 3 percent due to their dense labour force concentration.

Demographic trends in the Baniyas district of the governorate of Tartus are particularly interesting. Under the French Mandate, like many other coastal towns Baniyas had a Sunni majority of 77.5 percent, a Christian community

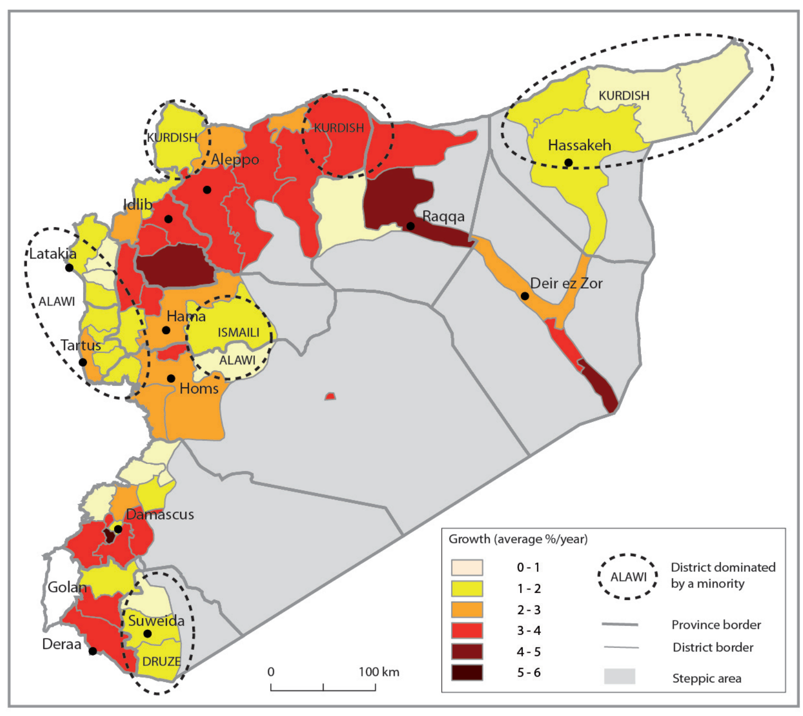


Fig. 4.8: Demographic growth in Syria by district, 1994–2004

of 16.2 percent and a small Alawi population of 6.3 percent.[49] By 1990, these demographics were almost reversed, with the Alawi population of Baniyas estimated at 65 percent.[50] There are two reasons for this: the migration of rural Alawi populations to districts like Baniyas (attracted by the large-scale industrial development of the city) and the 'packing' of the Alawi population in this district, through the administrative integration of the Alawi villages in the city's northern periphery, which were previously on the municipality's outskirts, into the municipality itself.

Since 1990, Baniyas has steadily lost its capacity to attract Alawi migrants, owing to the lack of new industrial projects and the amelioration of infrastructural and communications networks which facilitated commuting from the rural villages to the urban centre. Between 1994 and 2004, despite its negative net migration, the city of Baniyas experienced significant demographic growth which would seem to indicate an elevated birth rate. Alawi birth rates in this

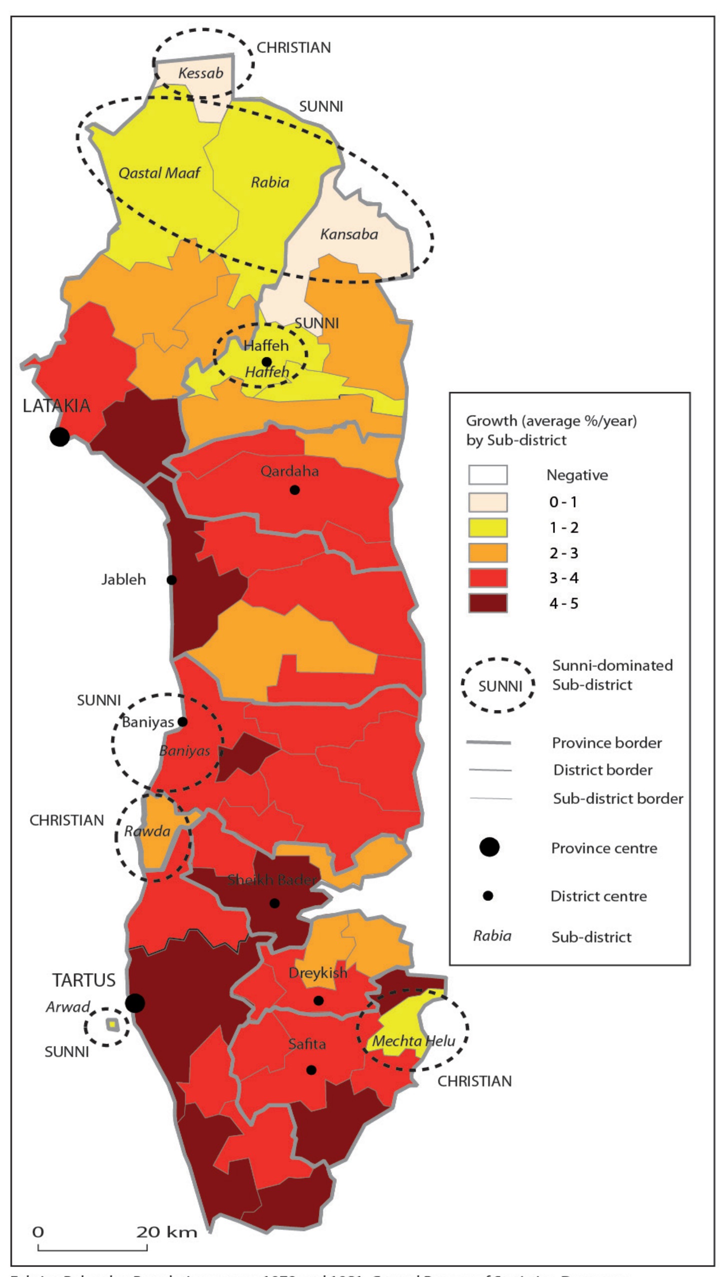
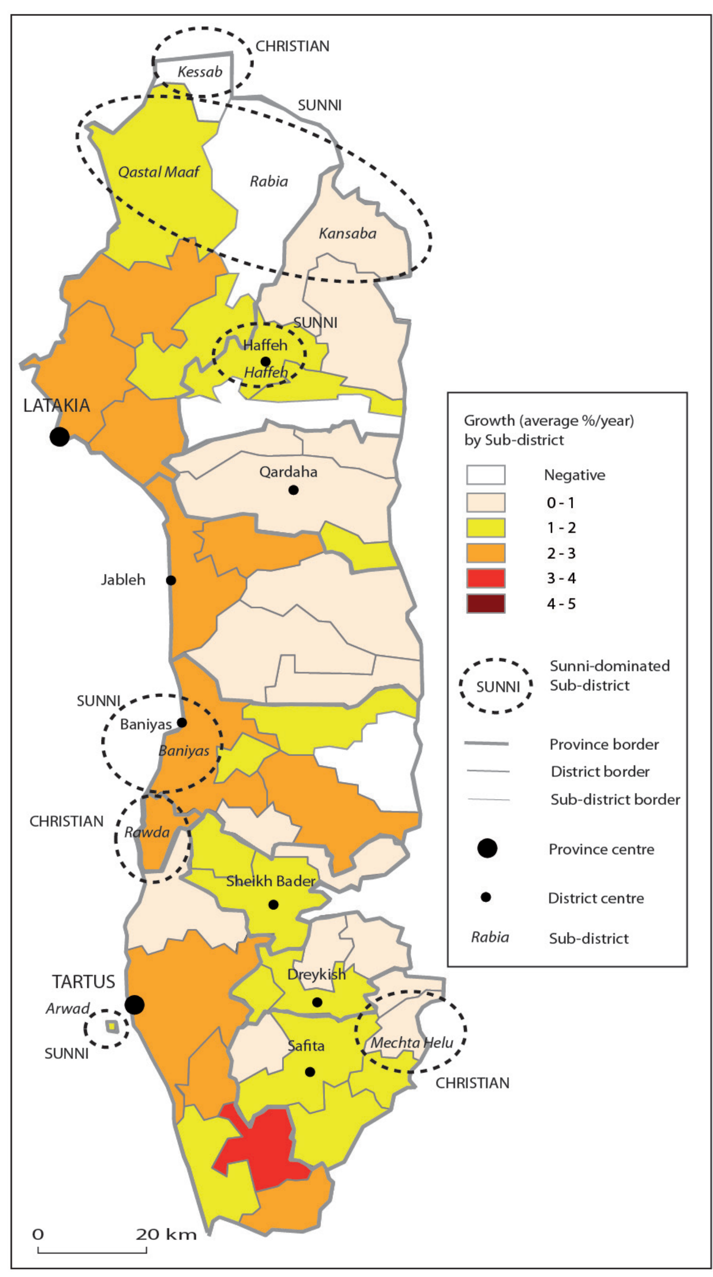


Fig. 4.9: Demographic growth in Latakia and Tartus by sub-district, 1970–81



Fabrice Balanche, Population census 1994 and 2004, Central Bureau of Statistics, Damascus

Fig. 4.10: Demographic growth in Latakia and Tartus by sub-district, 1994–2004

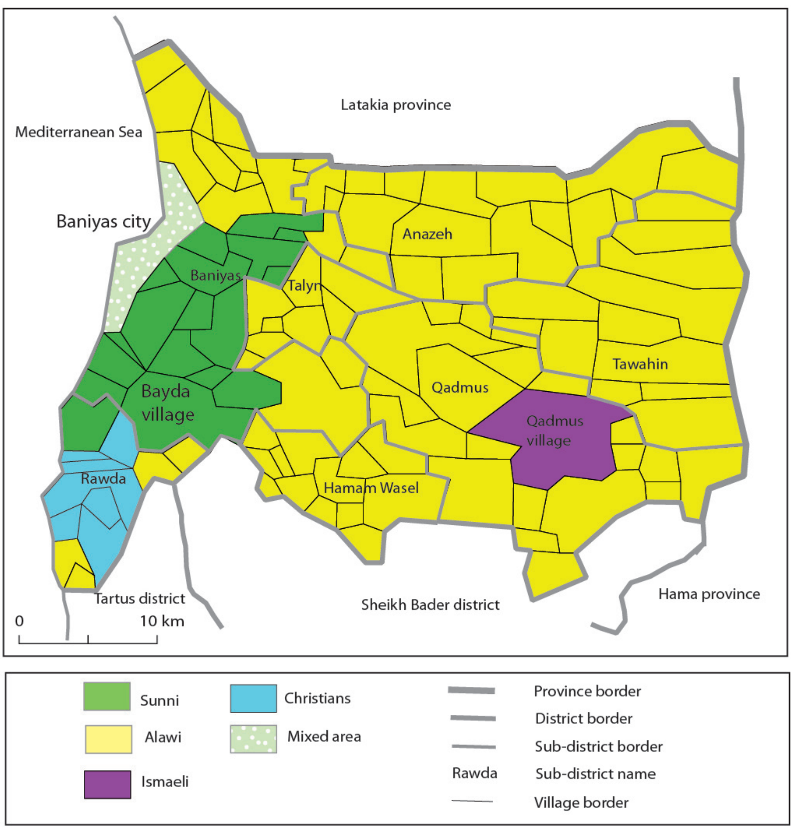


Fig. 4.11: Religious distribution of population in the Baniyas district

district remained low however, at 1.6 percent per year,[51] and they were even lower in the Alawi-majority villages bordering Baniyas, which include Talyn and Anazeh at 1.3 percent and 1.2 percent respectively. Thus, in the absence of Alawi migration to the district, and in light of the lower birth rates among Alawi communities, a higher growth rate in the Sunni community was the driver for significant demographic growth in this district.[52] Emboldened by this upward trajectory and the fact that Sunni demographic growth far outstripped that of the Alawi community, the Sunni community began confronting the state accusing it of deliberately depriving its districts of public services and economic opportunities that were open to the Alawi district. The revolt

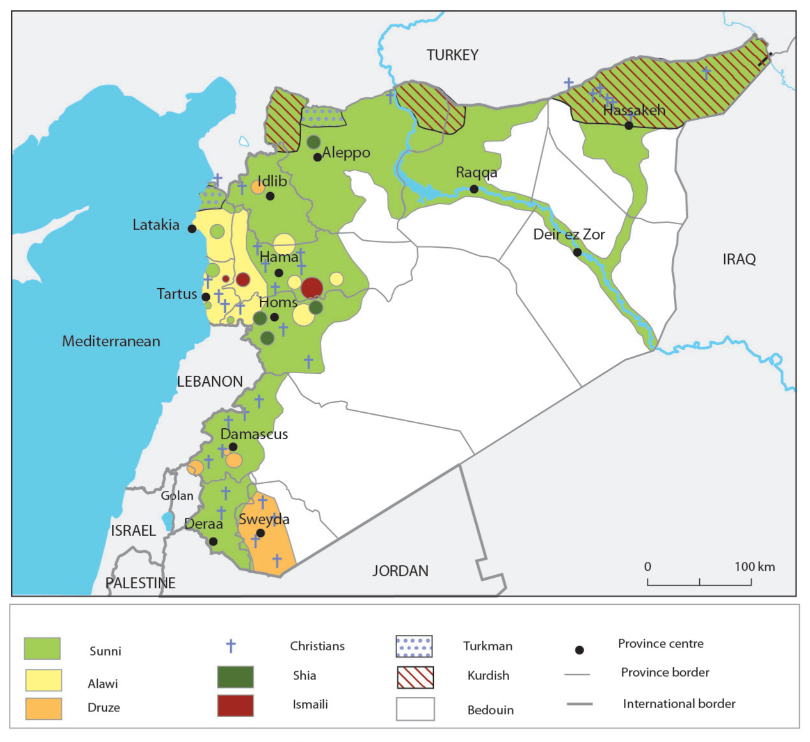


Fig. 4.12: Communal distribution in Syria

in the spring of 2011 in the Sunni quarters and villages of Baniyas, including Al Bayda,[53] led to violent confrontations between members of the Sunni and Alawi communities. The Alawis were accused of monopolising jobs in the public sector, particularly in the city's electric power station and its oil refinery. This was just one example of the Sunni community's increasing awareness of its growing numerical significance in the country, opposing the region's political system and contesting the state-sponsored fallacy of an Alawi-majority status quo.

Although the rate of growth in Kurdish-majority provinces was as weak as that of the Alawi population, this had much to do with the severe underdevelopment of the region which resulted in the migration of significant numbers from the north-eastern region, Afryn, Ayn El Arab, Hassakeh, Malkyeh, Qameshlyeh to Aleppo and Damascus. Similarly impoverished and underde-

veloped Sunni-majority territories, such as the high plateaus of Qalamoun, although witnessing an equally strong trend of people moving to Damascus, maintained high birth rates. Consequently, the growth rate in the Sunni plains south of Damascus, and across the vast Sunni crescent that stretches from the Syrian–Iraqi border to the foothills of Jabal Ansariya via Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, Idlib and Aleppo, did not fall below 3 percent a year. It is no coincidence that these zones are where the insurrection was most firmly rooted.

Insurrection and counter-insurgency

The first wave of violent conflict in the Alawi region during the Syrian uprising, in the spring of 2011, saw hundreds of arrests and many deaths.[54] According to Human Rights Watch, in May 2013, battles between insurgents and the army left more than 248 people dead with thousands from the Sunni districts of the coastal region forced to flee.[55] There were also significant massacres of Alawi civilians in Aramo[56] and Maan.[57] In response, Alawi regime-loyalists, highly conscious of the fact that a successful Sunni uprising would threaten their very existence in Syria, fought back with particular brutality.

Despite vicious repression in the Sunni-majority areas, and strategies verging on ethnic cleansing in the Alawi region, the combination of an ageing Alawi population, low birth rates and mass migration mean that the principal source of demographic support and military personnel, so critical to the regime's grip on power, is drying up. Conversely the demographic importance of Syria's Sunni-majority regions, potentially hostile to the regime, continues to grow both in the coastal region and on the broader national scale. The fundamental issue at stake remains the integrity and loyalty of the Syrian Arab Army. Does Bashar al-Asad have sufficient support or coercive capacity to compel the compliance of enough Sunni troops? Perhaps of equal importance, does he have sufficient Alawi soldiers to continue his counter-insurgency indefinitely? The answers to both questions are tellingly revealed in the fact that Sunni majority military units have not been utilised in major regime offensives, while Asad became increasingly reliant on external fighters from Lebanese Hizballah in coordination with Iranian intelligence personnel and Iraqi Shi'a militias.

From its inception, Syria's Sunni community played a prominent role in the armed forces. Sunni recruits, however, drawn from the poor rural regions comparable to Jabal Ansariya, like the Hauran and the regions surrounding Homs and the Euphrates, had fewer opportunities for professional promotion

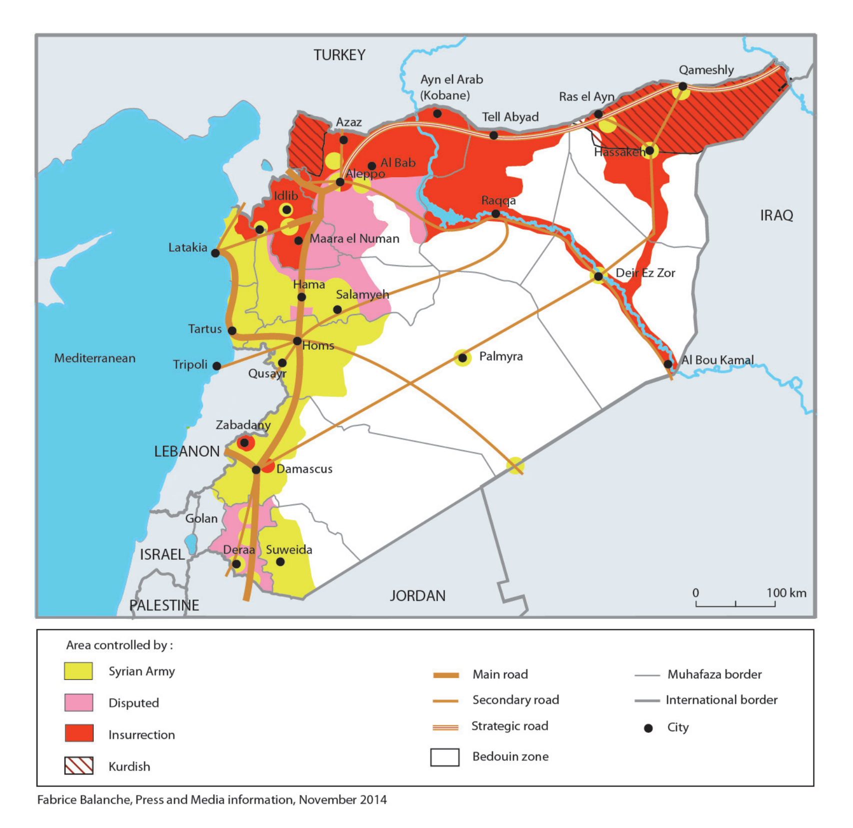


Fig. 4.13: The military situation in Syria, November 2014

in the armoured units, the air force, and the elite units of the Syrian Army (such as the infamous fourth division), which remained under the control of Alawi commanders who traditionally favoured the recruitment of Alawi personnel.[58] Mustapha Tlass,[59] who served as Hafez al-Asad's Minister of Defence between 1972 and 2004, is an example of a senior military officer from the Sunni community whose appointment benefited his Sunni supporters. However, since the beginning of the current crisis, when several high-profile Sunni officers (among them Lieutenant Abderrazzak Tlass,[60] nephew of Mustapha Tlass, who founded and commanded the Al Farouk Brigade which took Bab Amer in Homs for the rebels in the winter of 2011–12), deserted to join the Free Syrian Army, the need for a strong and faithful Alawi component capable of defending the regime has been brought sharply into focus.

When the Syrian Army's 'golden boy' General Manaf Tlass, Mustapha Tlass's son, proved incapable of quelling the opposition in his ancestral town of Rastan, allowing it to become an opposition stronghold and subsequently fleeing to France via Turkey in July 2012,[61] it became clear that the Sunni units were simply not reliable enough to carry out an offensive against the rebels. Although conscious that the reservoir of Alawi recruits was being drained, uncertain of their commitment and reliability, the regime left Sunni-majority regiments in their barracks. Consequently, it was slow to counter the insurrection and experienced great difficulty in regaining opposition-held territories.

Since the spring of 2012, in efforts to redress the communal imbalance in the security forces and to compensate for the significant losses suffered by the Army, the regime conscripted Alawis in the coastal region, calling on almost all men between the ages of 20 and 40 to serve and fight. Sunnis from the region were also called upon to serve, but the majority refused and either sought refuge in Turkey or, in some cases, joined the opposition after fleeing to the mountains north-east of Latakia (Jabal Akrad and Jabal Turkmen). Unsurprisingly, the Alawi community was more receptive to Asad's call to arms as many considered military service a defensive duty to ensure the survival of their community. Fear that Damascus might fall to the opposition and expose the Alawi community to a Sunni backlash was a strong motivating factor for fresh recruits.

The regime also called up Christian and Druze reservists, but with less success. While these communities do not have exactly the same vested economic interests in sustaining Syria's current status quo, as religious minorities that enjoyed protection under the Asads they tend to share the Alawi community's apprehensions about the prospect of the majority Sunni population coming to power. However, fearing being sent to the front line to fight in Aleppo or the contested Qalamun mountains, many Druze and Christians refused to join the regular armed forces, preferring instead to join the ranks of the National Defence Force (*Difaa al-Watani*), a militia organised by the regime with logistical support from Iran and Hizballah. Its job is to maintain government control over territories that have not fallen into opposition hands. Mobilising the civilian population behind the regime has the dual advantage of getting locals to protect their own villages and freeing up the army to fight elsewhere. After the seizure of Raqaa in January 2013 by Islamist forces, the regime began re-conquering territories that had fallen into rebel hands, compensating for the lack of loyal troops with technical superiority and support from Hizballah,[62] a number of Iranian[63] and Iraqi soldiers,[64] and even some fighters from the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).[65]

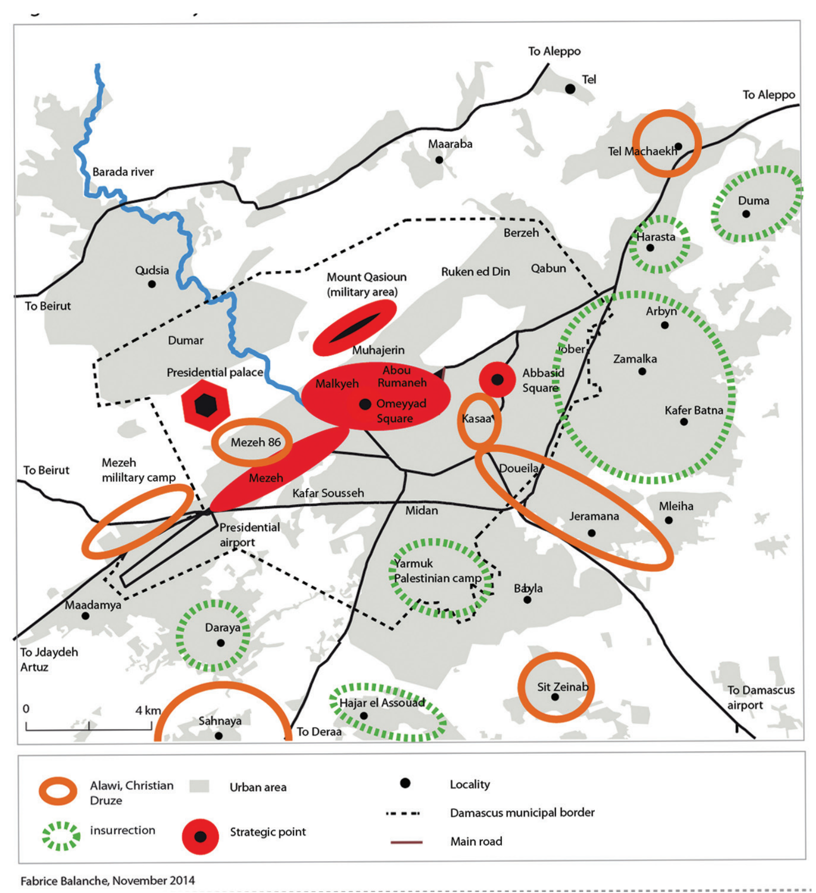


Fig. 4.14: The military situation in Damascus, November 2014

Back to the future: reviving an Alawi enclave

As mentioned previously, the Alawi coastal region, even prior to the civil conflict, enjoyed a positive net migration. This was largely due to employment opportunities in the army and the public sector, whereas up until the late 1980's the majority of internal migration to the capital came from the Alawi-majority governorates of Latakia and Tartus. By the early 1990s the situation had radically changed. The extensive development of the Alawi region through rigorous agrarian reforms, disproportionately high state investment and a thriving public industrial sector,[66] meant that the Alawi community had less

incentive to migrate to Damascus. These economic factors alone do not account for the large number of Alawis who were born in Damascus and subsequently decided to return to the villages of their parents' birth. This trend was indicative of the community's sense of insecurity and the failed cultural integration of the Alawi community in the Syrian capital. This is not the first time in contemporary Syrian history that the Alawi have retreated to the coastal region out of fear of persecution. The early 1980s saw a large wave of Alawi migration from Syria's second city Aleppo, as a result of the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising during which Alawis were targeted.[67] Many Alawi migrants sought refuge in the Daatur Basnada quarter of Latakia, which was specifically built for the community.

Since the onset of the conflict in 2011, Jabal Ansariya and the coastal region once again became a mountain refuge for tens of thousands of Alawi families from all over Syria. Leaving the country's large urban centres, they installed themselves in the small towns of the Jabal and the coastal region including Safita, Qardaha, Dreykish Skeykh Bader and Qadmus. Alawis were not however the only community fleeing the conflict and seeking refuge in the coastal region. By 2015, 'Alawi' governorates of Latakia and Tartus harbour almost a million internally displaced people, including Sunnis fleeing Aleppo and Homs. Yet for displaced Alawis or returnees, the coastal region is the only permanent sanctuary for the community in Syria. As one Alawi refugee explains:

> I was born in Aleppo in 1950; my parents were from Antioch. Before the onset of this crisis I never felt myself to be Alawi, even at the time of the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in the early 1980s. Since 2011, however, we have felt the hatred directed at us. In September 2012, I left Aleppo with my whole family when one of my cousins was assassinated in the street. We came to Tartus and we will stay here; I don't think we can ever return to live in Aleppo.[68]

A neo-Khaldunian conclusion?

Hafez al-Asad's targeted development policies accelerated the demographic transition of the Alawi community in Syria. Urbanisation, education, low fertility rates and the subsequent Alawi retreat from these urban centres to the Alawi coast were all by-products of his efforts to secure Alawi support for the regime. Ironically, these factors all served to weaken Bashar al-Asad's chances of survival in the struggle for Syria.

In less than half a century, the Alawi community experienced extraordinary promotion: landless illiterate peasants became officers in the army and their

children progressed to become engineers, professors, doctors and lawyers. The majority of Alawis came to reside in towns, and their villages quickly became vast peri-urban suburbs. The Alawis benefited more than any other community in the country from the politics of development, due to the clientelism that binds the Syrian regime to its core constituency. The Ba'athist regime undeniably modernised Syria, even if the system seized up in the 1990s, and the Alawi religious philosophy encouraged an open-minded approach towards change and innovation, of which female emancipation was a prime example. It is possible to identify those less developed zones and populations by charting the birth rate: Dar'a, the Sunni rural plains of Homs and Hama, and the north of Syria, which are currently opposition strongholds.

The large numbers of unemployed Syrian youths, many of whom do not even possess a limited level of education, remains a critical component of Syrian opposition discourse. Islamist groupings such as Ahrar Es-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State have prospered among a frustrated and disenfranchised Sunni population that wants to take revenge on the 'Alawi' state. This new 'wretched of the earth' have nothing to lose and everything to gain; they only needed a mobilising ideology to bring them together and give them a framework from which to win the '*mulk*'. Until 2015, at great cost Bashar al-Asad's regime had successfully resisted this movement, with the support of key international players and the military technology which allowed it to compensate for its inferior numbers. By contrast with Ibn Khaldun's age, the demographic variable is no longer as significant today as it once was; nevertheless, it should not be excluded from our analysis. Similar to the fourteenth century, when Ibn Khaldun was writing his political treatise, ethnic purging remains an effective weapon of war. In Syria it is being utilised to reduce the insurrection and to re-establish a demographic equilibrium between non-Sunni communities and their Sunni counterparts.[69]

Unsurprisingly, the civil war's high casualty rates, the large-scale displacement of peoples and severe economic restrictions have led to a significant reduction in the birth rate in every Syrian community. The situation is all the more critical for the Alawi community, which has suffered approximately 60,000 military losses.[70] There will be no swift demographic recovery and the losses linked to the war, whether directly or indirectly, will not be compensated by a rise in the birth rate after the conflict is brought to an end. Today the Alawi community forms approximately 10 percent of the Syrian population[71] and the regime is acutely aware that its political survival depends on sustained Alawi cohesion and loyalty.

While promoting Alawis within the system has led to the development of the community as a whole, Bashar al-Asad's regime and the Alawi community itself have become victims of their own accomplishments. The success of his father's policy of promoting Alawis to positions of responsibility throughout the state led what was previously a marginalised minority community from underdevelopment and poverty to the seat of power. During Bashar al-Asad's tenure however, this made his regime more fragile and its long-term viability precariously balanced on the support of so few.

5

SYRIA'S ALAWIS AND THE BA'ATH PARTY

Raymond Hinnebusch

This chapter surveys the interaction between Alawi identity and the Ba'ath Party's state-building project. The analysis rests on several assumptions, as follows.

First, multiple possible identities exist in Syria, ranging from the narrowest—clan, tribe, and sect—to broader party, class and state identifications, to supra-state identities. That none of these is hegemonic—taken for granted as the 'normal' dominant loyalty—spells a high potential for fragmentation. This is ameliorated by the fact that several identities can be held simultaneously, may overlap and reinforce as well as contradict each other, and are fluid and ever-changing, rather than hardening into irreconcilable primordial blocs. While Alawis are sometimes said to have a particularly strong '*asabiyya* (group solidarity), this has never excluded other identities and has varied considerably in intensity.

Second, which identities prevail among individuals, groups and the country at a given time is shaped by circumstances, notably the material context.[1] Insecurity (the domestic security dilemma) associated with power struggles increases the solidarity of sects, often the optimum group being neither too small nor too

large to enhance individuals' security and power position. The economic and infrastructural integration of a state's territory, combined with social mobilisation, secular education, geographic mobility, and non-agricultural employment, facilitates broadened identification of individuals with class, party and state. Conflicts over private control of scarce land and capital generate class identities; conversely, class-consciousness is discouraged and small group identity encouraged by the exceptional availability in MENA of rents concentrated in state hands, accessed via kin, tribal and sectarian *wasta* (clientele connections). Broader supra-state identities are facilitated by trans-state regional flows of Arab language media and discourses, migration and money, and also by the intense regional conflicts focused on Israel and Western intervention.

Third, agency also matters, namely, the promotion of identities by political entrepreneurs. State-builders normally try to bring state and identity (nation) into congruence because of the greater domestic legitimation and international power that this affords, promoted with tools at their disposal such as the media, state employment, conscription and national school systems.[2] However, Syria presents a challenge to nation-builders because of the weakness of distinctively Syrian national myths and the incongruence of Syria's imperialist-truncated boundaries with historic *bilad ash-sham*. As a result, competing sub- and supra-state identities powerfully compete with loyalties to the state: the mosaic of sectarian and ethnic minorities making up a third of the population; and the supra-state identities, such as Pan-Arabism, Pan-Syrianism, and Pan-Islam, which promise to re-unify the mutilated larger political community. As such, both ruling elites and opposition movements are bound to exploit these powerful identities against each other. Thus, Ba'athist state-builders, in their efforts to consolidate their regime, exploited *both* sub-state loyalties, notably the solidarity of the Alawi sect, which cemented the core of the new state elite, and the dominant supra-state Pan-Arab identity, used to legitimise the state; while the opposition promoted an alternative (mostly Sunni Islamic) identity to contest the regime's legitimacy. To be sure, Ba'athist Arabism is, in important respects, compatible with Syrian state identity, both in its secular inclusiveness of minorities and its discourse on Syria's special status as the 'beating heart of Arabism'. However, the continual reproduction of sub- and supra-state identities in regime-opposition power struggles has retarded consolidation of congruence between state/territory and identity/nation.

Alawi political identity and Syria's state formation

Alawis' ʿ*asabiyya* was rooted in their distinctive religion, an offshoot of Shiʿism, which set them apart and made them targets of several *fatwas* by prominent Sunni religious leaders, particularly Ibn Taymiyya, an icon of Salafi Islam, as well as by the Ottoman authorities. Further, as a 'compact minority' concentrated in one region rather than geographically dispersed, and relatively inaccessible in their mountain fastness, there was initially little opportunity for Alawis to integrate with the wider society.[3] Exclusively smallholder mountain peasants, no class divisions diluted communal solidarity; and although tribal divisions defined lines of intra-communal competition, these were muted by the defensive solidarity provoked by the low status of Alawis in Syrian society. Impoverishment owing to population growth on meagre land resources, leading Alawis to indenture their daughters as servants in the houses of Latakia urban notables, put them at the bottom of the social hierarchy in this Sunni city.

At the birth of the Syrian state, Syria's Arabic-speaking religious minorities were torn between Arab and sectarian identities. The French policy of divide and rule fostered minority separatism; the creation of a separate Alawi-dominated government in Latakia stimulated Alawi consciousness; and the recruitment of Alawis into the French-officered military levies tainted the community with collaboration, in the eyes of Sunni nationalists. Yet Alawis were divided between those fighting the French for autonomy under Salah al-Ali and allied to Syrian nationalists, and those who sought French protection against the Sunni majority. Alawis were pulled between the security dilemma and the opportunities from integration into the wider society.

Social mobilisation, class formation, politicisation

The paralleled rise of the Ba'ath Party and alteration of Alawi identity were both a function of Syria's post-independence class formation, which cut across sectarian lines. First, capitalist development in agriculture started the transformation of peasants from sharecroppers, who had enjoyed a modicum of security, into migratory wage labourers on the great estates. Alawis, as their population grew, spilled out of the mountains, becoming a rural proletariat on the great Sunni estates in the Hama and Homs area. This made them 'available' for political mobilisation by anti-oligarchy movements. In parallel, some sought a way out of poverty through careers as NCOs in the Army, a tradition begun under the French.[4]

Second, a 'new middle class' emerged in Syria, a stratum with only modest property, dependent on salaried state employment, and attracted to class and national identities that rivalled traditional attachments to family, sect or quarter. An important stratum of this new class was drawn from the rural towns and the peasantry, making up a partly-urbanised rural intelligentsia. The minority mountain peasantry (Alawis, Druze, Isma'ilis, Orthodox Christians), concentrated in such land-poor areas as Latakia, sought education as a route out of poverty and as a means of achieving status in Sunni-dominated society. In the Alawi mountains, the schools of Christian missionaries played an important role in giving poor Alawis educational opportunities.[5]

The spread of education among these minorities was associated with an embrace among the younger generation of both Pan-Arabism and Pan-Syrianism, secular identities enabling them to participate as equals in the national community, regardless of religion. Thus, Alawis' political mobilisation did not, with the sole exception of the inter-war Sulayman Murshid phenomenon, take a religious form. Rather, Alawis' communal identity chiefly defined a mutual protection network for individuals moving into a Sunni-majority society.[6]

Class formation in Syria was reflected in the rising political conflicts of the 1950s. Several radical middle-class parties, which cut across Sunni-minority divisions, emerged to contest the power of the landed–commercial oligarchy, and of these parties the Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party eventually became the main political vehicle that overthrew the old regime. The party was founded in the 1940s by two middle-class Damascene schoolteachers, Michel Aflaq, a Christian Orthodox who made the party appear friendly to minorities, and Salah ad-Din Bitar, a member of the majority Sunni Muslim community. Zaki Arsuzi, an Alawi teacher and refugee from Iskanderun, and Wahib al-Ghanim, an Alawi doctor from Latakia, played major roles in politicising and recruiting Alawi youth to the party. Because the Ba'ath Party initially found little receptivity in the cities—which were dominated by Sunni urban notables, traditional quarter leaders and religious sheikhs hostile to a secular creed—its proselytisation was diverted toward plebeian elements, including peasant youth who came to the city for an education. Many of these were minority youth, Alawi, Druze or Isma'ili, attracted to a radical and secular movement through which they could achieve integration into the nation and yet challenge the ruling oligarchy through social revolution. These early, largely rural, recruits disproportionately entered two professions that would be crucial to the power struggle in Syria: teaching, where they were enabled to recruit their students; and the Army, which they would eventually capture and use against

the oligarchy. The Ba'ath Party's 1953 merger with Akram al-Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party gave it a mass cross-sectarian peasant base as Hawrani mobilised both Alawi and Sunni landless peasants in a class-based, 'land to the peasant' campaign against the great Sunni landlords of northern Syria.[7]

The Ba'ath's main rival for the loyalty of Syria's minorities, including Alawis, was the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), another secular party led by a Christian. Its militant secularism was, for minorities, an alternative to what they saw as Sunni-dominated Arab nationalism, but this also limited its appeal to the Sunni majority. During a mid-1950s power struggle over Western meddling in Syrian politics, in which the SSNP became implicated and which the Ba'ath strongly opposed, the SSNP was eclipsed, precipitating a movement of its Alawi followers to the Ba'ath.[8] Unlike the SSNP, the Ba'ath reached out to Sunnis, especially those of rural background, and hence had more success in bridging the minority–majority gap, particularly during its late-1950s close alignment with Sunni-dominated Nasserist Egypt.

The Ba'ath Party played a major role in promoting the 1958 Union with Egypt in the name of Pan-Arab ideology, but the UAR spelled disaster for it. It split over how to deal with Nasser after the UAR broke down in 1961 as Hawrani's partisans broke off and embraced separatism, while yet other Ba'athists deserted to new Nasserist movements. The split with Nasser cost the party a large part of its urban middle-class following, reducing it to its original, largely rural, core. Under the brief 'separatist regime' (1961–3), the Alawi-dominated Latakia branch of the party, one of the strongest, and in parallel a group of Ba'athist officers, also heavily minoritarian (the 'military committee'), began to re-organise the party independently of the senior party leaders with the aim of taking power in a military *coup*.[9]

Alawi Ba'athists would come to play a pivotal role in driving Syrian politics in subsequent years. Emerging from the bottom of Syria's stratification system and separated from the Sunni ruling oligarchy by reinforcing class and religious cleavages, they constituted a sort of surrogate proletariat—the mobilised social force that had the most to gain from a thorough revolution in Syria. Within the Ba'ath they pushed for radicalisation, and later were the strongest defenders of the Ba'athist revolution. The apocryphal assertion of Alawi officers that socialism allowed the rural minorities to 'impoverish the town',[10] just as capitalism operated to the advantage of the Sunni city, reflected a social reality: a land-poor impoverished community, possessing nothing but its drive for education and careers, had everything to gain from a state-dominated economy which would divert control of opportunities from the holders of private wealth.

The Ba'ath revolutionary coup and Alawis in intra-Ba'ath politics: 1963–70

Originating in a conspiracy by the handful of military officers who seized power in the 1963 *coup*, the Ba'ath regime started as an 'army–party symbiosis',[11] with a narrow popular base and facing fierce opposition from the Nasserites, Islamists and liberals who dominated urban politics. Although fronted by a Sunni general, Amin al-Hafiz, the fact that the emerging Ba'ath leadership was by now heavily 'minoritarian' (Alawi, Druze, and Isma'ili), predominately rural and its rivals were chiefly urban and Sunni, gave the conflict between the regime and opposition a predominately urban–rural and sectarian rather than a class character.

The new regime intended, and soon launched, a socialist 'revolution from above' that would build the rural and class power base needed to stabilise its rule; but initially the key to survival was control of the Army. Thus to entrench itself, the Ba'ath purged officers suspected of loyalty to the urban bourgeoisie or Nasserism, mostly Sunnis, replacing them with NCOs which, according to Batatu,[12] were by 1963 60 percent Alawi, a function of their historic choice of such careers as a route out of poverty; moreover, as part of the 'Ba'athisation' designed to *coup*-proof the army, Ba'athists, many of them Alawis, benefited from preferential recruitment to the military academy.

In this period, the Ba'ath was also split internally by a power struggle between the old guard of Aflaq and Bitar, backed by Amin al-Hafiz, and the new generation of more radical leaders. The party moderates, expressing the worldview of the urban middle class, sought a reformist road to development in which the state could secure the cooperation of Sunni business; the radicals, who spoke for the provincial lower middle class and the peasants, sought a socialist revolution against the power of the urban establishment. While this struggle was about ideology and personal power, both sides exploited sectarianism: Amin al-Hafiz exploited Sunni resentment of minority dominance in the Army while the leader of the radicals, the Alawi general Salah Jedid, exploited the minorities' fear of Sunnis. While this conflict ended with the ousting of the moderates in a February 1966 *coup*, inter-party factionalism continued. In September 1966, several Druze officers who had participated in the 1966 *coup*, feeling themselves excluded from the inner circles of power, joined with dissidents still loyal to the ousted party moderates in an attempted *coup* and were purged; after the 1967 war, Haurani Sunni officers around Chief of Staff Ahmad Suwaydani, who believed he was being blamed for the Army's poor performance in the war, were also purged after his attempted *coup*. These political purges enhanced Alawi predominance in the Army and

regime. By 1969, the two senior Alawi generals, Jedid and Defence Minister Hafez al-Asad, headed rival radical and moderate factions in the party, locked in a power struggle over how to respond to the disastrous defeat by Israel in the 1967 war.[13]

Sectarianism became prominent in intra-Ba'ath politics because the procedural legitimacy supposed to settle intra-party conflicts remained precarious and authority therefore insecure, especially as officer–politicians retained the ability to use military threats and force in such struggles. Political rivals were hence driven to build maximum coalitions by exploiting every available tie: personal, generational, social class, regional and, above all, sectarian. Although sectarian aggrandisement was not the goal, amidst such insecurity, blocs tended to form among those who, coming from the same region or sect, felt a greater degree of mutual trust: hence Alawis, Hauranis, Druzes, etc. tended to support each other. At the same time, because only cross-sectarian alliances could normally take and keep power, rival coalitions were built of a multitude of ties and were fluid, shifting with circumstance and issue, rather than solid primordial 'blocs': thus, in the major 1966 and 1970 showdowns the opposing camps were cross-sectarian, civil–military coalitions at odds over power and ideology.[14]

However, the initial disproportionate representation of sectarian minorities in the Party and Army was reinforced by the purges inevitably inflicted on the losers in power struggles and the tendency for the victors to put trusted followers, often fellow sectarians, in key posts. Alawis emerged better off in each of the main intra-party showdowns; while Sunnis, being divided along class, urban–rural and regional lines, hence lacking comparable solidarity, were disproportionately purged. This narrowed sectarian representation in the military elite in particular and further stimulated sectarian politics. But it was Hafez al-Asad's consolidation of power that most enhanced Alawi predominance at the centre.

Regime consolidation under Hafez al-Asad

The Ba'athist faction which Hafez al-Asad brought to power in 1970 was initially indistinguishable in social composition from his radical rivals, but could be said to mark the victory of the military over the radical intelligentsia. Asad's priority was to consolidate the unstable Ba'ath state and mobilise Syria to recover the Golan Heights, lost in the 1967 war with Israel. In the process, he turned the Ba'ath state from an instrument of class revolution into a machinery of power in the service of *raison d'état*.

Asad's strategy of state-building was essentially neo-patrimonial: concentrating power in a 'presidential monarchy' by co-opting and balancing rival elements in a broad coalition. Thus, he initially used his Army base to free himself from Ba'ath Party ideological constraints. Then, he built up a *jama'a* (group) of Alawi personal followers, often his kin, appointed to crucial security and military commands, which gave secure control over the military establishment. Yet, also anxious to placate urban Sunnis, especially Damascenes, he also co-opted significant numbers of them into the top ranks of the party and non-party technocrats into government, and also initiated a limited economic liberalisation beneficial to the Sunni merchant class.[15]

Asad's strategy of power consolidation, in recruiting kin and tribe into the inner core, necessarily enhanced Alawi predominance. The subordination of the Ba'ath Party's collegial leadership bodies to an Alawi president buttressed by an Alawi coercive apparatus accountable only to himself represented a significant increase in the power of certain Alawis. The Alawi officers around Asad were appropriately termed 'barons', because as kinsmen or clients of the president they combined privileged access to him with positions in the party-state and control of the levers of coercion. They were, therefore, in an unrivalled position to act as political brokers.

Until the early 1980s, the president's brother, Rifat al-Asad, commanding the Defence Detachments (*al-saraya al-difa'*), was the foremost regime baron. Adnan al-Asad headed the 'Struggle Companies' which controlled access routes to the capital and guarded its command posts, while Asad's son-in-law Adnan Makhluf commanded the Presidential Guard. Ali Haydar headed the Special Forces and Ibrahim al-Ali the militia-like Popular Army. Muhammed al-Khuli, the head of the intelligence coordinating committee in the presidency, was perhaps Asad's most trusted lieutenant; while Ali Duba, head of military intelligence, proved one of the most durable regime barons. Asad's Alawi clients also held a very disproportionate number of top operational commands in the regular Army, especially of armoured units with the potential to carry out *coups*; General Shafiq Fayyad long commanded the critical Third Division, while two other Alawi generals, Ibrahim Safi and Adnan Badr Hasan, had extended tenure as commanders of the First and Ninth Divisions. In the late 1990s, Alawi general Ali Aslan replaced the Sunni general, Hikmat al-Shihabi, as chief of staff.[16] The army was divided between Alawi-dominated praetorian guard units that defended the regime and the wider professional army that defended the country's borders; where Sunni officers commanded units, they were paired with Alawi deputy commanders, hence a sectarian

network of control that ran parallel to the formal bureaucratic chain of command, symptomatic of neo-patrimonial practice.[17]

In spite of this, the regime ruling core remained a cross-sectarian coalition. Asad took pains not to be identified as leader of an Alawi block in the regime, and having taken power through alliances with senior Sunni military officers and party politicos (men such as Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Hikmat al-Shihabi, Naji Jamil, Abdullah al-Ahmar and Mustafa Tlas) he had, initially at least, to share power with them.

Secondly, the composition of the second ranks of the elite remained cross-sectarian. Thus, in the powerful military branch of the Ba'ath Party, Sunnis (43.4 percent) and Alawis (37.7 percent) shared top offices, while in the council of ministers (cabinet), the majority Sunnis were represented more closely proportional to their share of the population: thus from 1963 to 1978 Sunnis held 58.2 percent of positions, Alawites 20 percent, Druzes 10.6 percent, Isma'ilis 6.5 percent and Christians 4.7 percent.

Nor were provincial Sunnis squeezed out: indeed, in the late-1980s many Sunni Ba'athists from Dar'a province (Hauran) emerged at the top of the party and state pyramids.[18] This recruitment expressed an informal but widely understood 'ethnic arithmetic', meant to broaden the regime's base.

Thirdly, much of elite politics was ultimately about the competition of rival clientelist networks to corner public resources and dispense patronage to followers, and these networks cut across sectarian lines, with rival Alawi brokers each having Sunni allies or followings of Sunni clients. For example, opposing coalitions of Alawi barons, high state officials and supplier agents battled for control over the awarding of contracts and the commissions at stake in them.[19] On the other hand, clientelism encouraged intra-Alawi tribal rivalries for patronage, with the majority of the top Alawi elite recruited from the tribes of the President and his wife.

Fourth, the regime was only stabilised by its successful incorporation of a cross-sectarian coalition at its base, incorporating Sunni peasants through land reform and co-optation. The Ba'ath revolution benefited wide sectors of the lower classes, particularly peasants who got land, high state prices for their crops, subsidised inputs and electrification of their villages and whose children got better access to education and state careers.[20] The Alawi community benefited from the Ba'ath's socialist development, but Drysdale's analysis of public expenditures found no excessive favouritism toward Alawi compared to Sunni areas.[21]

Alawis' Class Differentiation and Clientelism Under Asad

The consolidation of Asad's rule had contrary effects on the Alawi community, reinforcing sectarianism but also dividing Alawis by class. As regards the latter, a kind of 'military–mercantile complex', as Sadiq al-Azm put it,[22] took shape at the apex of the regime. The Alawi elite, especially military and intelligence officers, entered into business deals with the Damascene Sunni merchant class. Their resulting enrichment turned one of the previously strongest forces for radical change into a 'state bourgeoisie' with privileges to defend.

Seale[23] speculated that this was part of Asad's attempt to give his regime a class underpinning that would stabilise it; in fact, the resultant muting of the former sharp antagonism between the state and the private bourgeoisie did help consolidate the regime. Yet, only if Alawi members of the power elite broadly amalgamated with the various factions of the new and old Sunni bourgeoisies into a dominant class was the sectarian cleavage likely to be neutralised by class solidarity at the top, and this process had barely begun in the 1970s. Indicative of the desire of some Alawi elites to join a hitherto Sunni-dominated upper class was Rifat al-Asad's attempt to mobilise educated professionals through his university graduates' association and to pose as a champion of economic liberalisation favourable to the Sunni-dominated bourgeoisie. However, Alawi elites had not yet produced a significant stratum of private businessmen, and as long as their economic base remained formally in the public sector, they lacked the secure control of wealth deriving from private ownership. Intermarriages between Alawis and the old aristocracy or the commercial bourgeoisie were the exception, deterred both by religion and the fact that many of the first-generation Alawi elite had village wives. By the 1990s, their children were going into business with Sunni partners and, having been raised privileged, sought acceptance in Sunni elite society, but there is little evidence that intermarriages on a wide scale were taking place.

In parallel, an Alawi salaried middle class emerged, technocrats who became moving forces behind public sector industries and a liberal-minded stratum of professionals—doctors, economists and intellectuals.[24] The use by the Alawi middle strata of the Army, police and public sector to get out of the village and advance their fortunes gave them a stake in preserving the dominant roles of state institutions over the private market where the Sunni bourgeoisie retained power. Well after regime-connected elements of the Alawi community had enriched themselves, the preference of the community remained statist and socialist. Indeed, the Alawis turned from a force for change in Syria into a defender of the statist status quo, opposed to either

economic or political liberalisation, which would work to the advantage of the Sunni elites.

At the same time, many Alawis remained in the lower classes. Rural Alawi communities remained impoverished, with some still lacking running water even in the 2000s, while some Alawi neighbourhoods of Damascus that housed rural migrants remained mere shanty towns. Still, even as class differentiation emerged within the Alawi community, clientele links cut across it, reinforcing Alawi cohesion. Thus, Alawi security barons headed clientele networks of property-less and marginal Alawi youth—literally a lumpenproletariat—who left their villages in large numbers, joining en masse the regime's multiple security militias. Their migration and settlement in their own neighbourhoods in Damascus, while still retaining strong ties to the village, preserved Alawi identity. Yet, Alawis were not permitted and would not have been well served by overtly mobilising on sectarian grounds (indeed, lacking a strong religious identity, they did not object to the regime's attempt to have them accepted as Shi'a Muslims). Rather, the fact that the Alawi community now had a national-level leadership at the top of party and state facilitated a broadening of their identity to these institutions.

Sectarianism and the Ikhwan Uprising, 1976–82

From the time the Ba'ath Party seized power, its most durable opposition came from the Muslim Brotherhood, allied with elements of the merchant class, old oligarchy and politicised Muslim clergy. In 1964 they mounted a challenge to the Ba'ath, notably in Hama, where the army shelled a mosque. In May 1967, prominent cleric Hassan Habbanaka mobilised the Muslims of the Midan district against the 'godless' secular discourse of the radical Ba'athists; in the early 1970s, he led new protests over the secular constitution. Although Asad struck alliances with Damascene merchants, the protracted Ikhwan uprising of 1976–82 demonstrated that many Sunnis remained unreconciled to Ba'ath and Alawi rule. Although the conflict came to be framed in sectarian terms, its roots were in class animosities. The accumulated resentment of the old oligarchy and merchants damaged by Ba'athist socialism had been festering for years; indeed, the Ikhwan manifesto expressed private-sector grievances in calling for a rollback of land reform and of state intervention in the economy. Additionally, the sectarian animosities unleashed in the Lebanese civil war had a certain spill-over effect in Syria, and the regime's 1976 intervention against the PLO on the side of Christians, although for geopolitical reasons, was seen

as a betrayal by minorities of the Palestine cause and cost the regime considerable legitimacy. At the same time, Alawis in power were resented for their corruption, flaunting the law and favouring their kin in recruitment to state jobs, with those left out, usually Sunnis, feeling their own identity accentuated by this discrimination. This spread sympathy for political Islam among wider segments of the middle class.

Indeed, the Ikhwan strategy was to arouse the Sunni majority against the regime by framing the conflict in explicitly sectarian terms.[25] The Brothers declared a *jihad* against the rule of Alawi 'unbelievers'. An intensive campaign began in the late 1970s of sabotage and assassinations of Alawi elites, meant to provoke reprisals and sectarian conflict. A watershed was the 1979 massacre by a Sunni Ba'ath officer of over 50 Alawi officer cadets in the Aleppo military academy, an act that did indeed stimulate Sunni–Alawi tensions in the Army; as the conflict intensified, there were further instances of defection of Sunni officers to the Islamic opposition motivated by sectarian animosities, including the attempt on Asad's life by a member of the presidential guard. Regime reprisals, notably those by Rifat al-Asad, further exacerbated sectarian hatreds. Within the regime itself, inter-sectarian tensions displaced ideological conflicts, with Sunni Ba'athists more prepared to accommodate the opposition than Alawi hard-liners.

The regime survived because the Alawis were better organised, armed and centrally positioned than their opponents. The security apparatus mounted a repressive campaign of unusual ruthlessness that peaked with the sack of Hama, a campaign led by Alawi troops but also including Kurdish and Bedouin units. To succeed against the regime, the Ikhwan would have had to mobilise nearly the entire Sunni community, but in fact the latter was split or inaccessible to the insurgents. The Ba'ath Party and Army did not, with few exceptions, unravel along sectarian lines, even under the pressures of near sectarian civil war. This solidarity of regime institutions, in turn, is explained by both the Alawi control network in the Army and the party's roots in the villages, which used to be exploited by the same urban forces represented in the Muslim uprising; the regime was thus able to mobilise segments of the Sunni peasantry by painting the insurgency as an attempt by urban interests to reverse the land reform. The party penetrated the Sunni-dominated bureaucracy and Sunni villages, making them largely unavailable for anti-regime mobilisation. The Sunni middle class did not go over to the Islamic opposition en masse and the rebellion was geographically concentrated in the northern cities, notably Aleppo and Hama, while the Damascene bourgeoisie, with a

stake in Asad's economic liberalisation, remained loyal to the regime. Alawi solidarity was reinforced by the uprising: their disproportionate benefit from the regime, and fear of the revenge they could face if it fell, gave them a strong stake in regime survival.

After Hama, remnants of the Ikhwan fled into exile and the rebellion collapsed. However, the period left a permanent mark on the regime and the Alawis. The repression at Hama left both vulnerable to revanchism; hence, the surveillance and repression of dissent in Syria became more pervasive. This, combined with the deadening of Ba'ath intra-party life, reversed institutionalisation and further accentuated the patrimonial side of the regime.[26] The Alawis were now more wary of economic or political liberalisation that could empower the Sunni-dominated business or religious establishments, segments of which had flirted with the Ikhwan. At the same time, however, in order to marginalise Sunni militants, Asad tried to appease and foster a moderate, non-political, Islamic establishment by building mosques, patronising the *ulama*, notably Sufis, and propagating Islam in the mass media. This had the inadvertent effect of spreading Islamic ideology at the expense of secularism.

Bashar al-Asad: debilitating the party-sect regime pillars

Bashar al-Asad's project was to modernise the Ba'ath state through liberal economic reforms, seemingly necessitated by the exhaustion of the public sector and the decline of oil rent, and designed to stimulate the private sector and engineer Syria's movement toward a market economy. This meant privileging investors at the expense of the regime's traditional constituencies. If Hafez had stabilised the regime around a dual alliance with the Alawi community and the Ba'ath Party, Bashar's reforms required he ease his dependence on both; however, in doing so he inadvertently weakened the regime's key supporting pillars.

In his effort to consolidate his power against resistance from the old guard and the Ba'ath Party apparatus, which was obstructing his liberal reforms, Bashar gradually removed many of the Sunni associates of his father, the watershed being the ousting of Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam and other senior party leaders in 2005. The cost of uprooting these long-time regime stalwarts was that Asad weakened powerful clientele networks that incorporated key segments of society into the regime. Bashar became therefore more dependent on the Asad–Makhlouf family clan, with a resulting over-concentration of patronage, opportunities and corruption in its hands at the expense of other regime clients. The most privileged segments of the Alawi

elite were positioning themselves to survive the move from a state-dominated to a market economy by moving into private business, thereby becoming a key part of the regime's crony capitalist backing.

At the same time, Asad saw the party apparatus and the worker and peasant unions as obstacles to economic reform, so starved them of funds and attacked their powers of patronage. The Ba'ath's decline as an elite recruitment channel and reductions in benefits for cadres led to a haemorrhage of members, hollowing out the regime's organised connection to its constituency and shrivelling its penetration of neighbourhoods and villages. This and the neglect of the rural areas by an urban-centred economic strategy snapped the alliance with the Sunni peasantry on which the regime had consolidated itself under Hafez.[27] This made it more vulnerable to a new resurgence of Islamist opposition, which was, for the first time, penetrating the regime's former rural stronghold.

In parallel, sectarian mistrust, long simmering under the surface, was aggravated as social mobility slowed down for most people; meanwhile a few at the top—famously Rami Makhlouf, the President's cousin—were ostentatiously enriched, with success appearing dependent on sectarian connections. Syria was also potentially vulnerable to the spread across its borders of the 'disease' of sectarian violence that afflicted neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq, although for a time their negative demonstration effect led Syrians to value social peace. The regime's jettisoning of Ba'athist ideology left a vacuum that neo-liberalism and Islamism competed to fill and opened wider space for a Gulf-promoted Salafist revival, which, in the right conditions, could morph into *jihadism*; indeed, the regime actually fostered a jihadist stream against the US occupation of Iraq, which would boomerang against it after the 2011 uprising.

At the same time, the regime's Alawi support base was weakened. In the mid-2000s, enormous external pressures, notably the international tribunal formed to investigate the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, introduced fractures into the regime's Alawi core. The 'suicide' of Ghazi Kannan, who had close links with Hariri and was the most credible Alawi alternative to Bashar al-Asad, damaged Asad's standing among many Alawis. Assaf Shawkat, the President's brother-in-law and security chief was side-lined for a period, possibly over the mysterious assassination of Hizballah military leader Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus. In parallel, the regime's links to the wider Alawi community frayed. The second-generation Alawi elite had grown up in a privileged urban environment, were educated abroad, went into business as crony capitalists and lost touch with the rural egalitarian ethos of the community. Ordinary Alawis were wary of Bashar's attempt to reach out

to Sunnis, symbolised by his marriage outside the community to a Sunni. At the same time, his economic liberalising policies enriched a new urban bourgeoisie but led to neglect of the Army, hence, of opportunity for Alawis, and of the rural areas. Indicative of the strains in regime–Alawi relations were Alawi demonstrations in Latakia in October 2007.[28]

The imperatives of economic reform were leading the regime to restructure its social base in a post-populist direction, moving from its earlier dual Alawi–Ba'ath Party constituency (with its rural Sunni links) to an alliance with a cross-sectarian urban bourgeoisie.

Alawis in the Syrian uprising

The origination of the Syrian uprising in the villages, medium-sized cities, and shanty towns was indicative of the reversal of the regime's social base under Bashar al-Asad. From the outset, the uprising mixed rural and sectarian grievances. It began in Dar'a, formerly a base of the Ba'ath, where corruption and drought had encouraged Salafism among unemployed youth; then, tribal reaction against the arrest of their youth and the extreme over-reaction of the security forces, which Asad declined to call to account, ignited the tinder, which quickly spread elsewhere. In Baniyas, demonstrations started against the ban on the *niqab* in schools; in Latakia, against an Alawi mafia-like grouping, the Shabiha. A persistent centre of rebellion was religiously-mixed Homs, where the juxtaposition of sectarian communities inflamed the conflict. The uprising also spread to Hama and Deir az-Zur, traditional bastions of Sunni piety resentful of the regime, with desire for revenge for the events of 1982 still alive in the former. The main occasion for mobilisation became Friday prayers, with resistance committees springing up around mosques and the *imams*, natural leaders of their neighbourhoods, sometimes taking the lead.

It was, however, by no means inevitable that this conflict, in good part defined by class—the deprived against the privileged—would by 2012 morph into a violent sectarian war. The mainstream of the uprising initially took the form of peaceful protest; the opposition sought to win over the minorities with rhetoric of civic inclusion, and some liberal Alawis initially stood with the protesters. The social base on which the regime relied was also cross-sectarian, comprising the crony capitalists and urban government employees, often Sunni, and the minorities. The mainly Sunni cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where a late 2000s investment boom, a surge in tourism and new consumption stimulated by Asad's economic policies were concentrated,

remained largely quiescent for months into the uprising; and indeed the regime was able to mobilise significant counter-demonstrations in its urban heartland. The middle classes of the two main cities originally saw Bashar as a reformer, and while they were disillusioned by his repression of the protesters, many feared instability and the loss of their secular modern lifestyle if traditional rural or Salafi insurgents were to take power.[29]

The regime's resort to the 'security solution'—arrests and violence against the protesters—was the fatal step on the road to sectarian civil war. The opposition, in turn, demanded the fall of the regime and showed its capacity to fill the streets with interminable protests, which put the regime on the defensive; given the weakening of Ba'athism as an ideology and an organisation, the regime had little capacity to counter with a mobilisation of its own rural supporters (as it had done in the 1980s Islamic insurgency). The regime, therefore, saw its best chance to survive as rallying the minorities and reinforcing the cohesiveness of its Alawi base by painting the opposition as extreme Islamist terrorists who should be violently repressed. A particularly sectarian caste was impacted by the regime's recruitment and use of heavily-Alawi militias, the so-called *Shabiha*. As the regime secured the support of minorities, who could expect retribution if it fell, opposition mobilisation took on a more Sunni Islamist hue. The opposition also had an incentive to sectarianise the conflict since, to the extent to which it became framed in such terms, the insurgents would be more able to overcome class and urban–rural divisions among Sunnis and fully mobilise their big (70 percent) Sunni demographic advantage. The militarisation of the conflict resulted from regime violence against demonstrators, which legitimised armed self-defence by the opposition and precipitated Sunni defections from the Army, leading to the creation of the 'Free Syrian Army'. Also fuelling violent sectarianism was the influx of Sunni jihadists, backed by money and guns from the Gulf. Some of these were veterans of the early 1980s 'Fighting Vanguard' *talia al-muqatila* of the Islamic revolution, who had, after the failure of their insurgency in Syria, morphed into trans-national jihadists in Afghanistan where they played a role in the formation of al-Qaeda.[30]

The Alawis were trapped between the regime and the opposition. Some initially tried to dilute sectarian tensions with Sunnis, and some Alawi sheikhs disassociated themselves from the regime's repression. However, since Alawis made up a disproportionate number of the security services that were constantly on the front line, they suffered a larger proportion of casualties relative to the size of their population than did the Sunnis;[31] they therefore came to

see those seeking to overthrow the regime, even if via peaceful protest, to be aggressors and the Alawi dead to be martyrs in the fight against terrorism.[32] In Damascus, neighbouring Alawi and Sunni areas experienced mutual attacks. As Alawis were targeted for their identity—threatened with eradication by Sunni Islamic radicals, like Saudi-based Sheikh Adnan Aroor's threats against regime supporters—they closed ranks behind the regime.[33] The regime, unable to protect Alawis, armed them in militias that were responsible for atrocities, not necessarily by state policy but as a function of the security dilemma. Sectarian strife fed into an apparent drive for establishment of 'sectarian-cleansed' regions secure from the threat of the 'Other', raising the possibility of post-war fragmentation of Syrian territory along confessional lines.

As the conflict was increasingly framed as an Alawi–Sunni conflict, more overt Alawi symbolism and anti-Sunni discourse, notably deprecation of *takfiris*, appeared. In parallel, Alawi identification with the regime was solidified: as Rosen put it, unable to separate themselves from the regime or imagine a Syria without Asad, Alawis adopted slogans such as 'Asad forever'. He reported that: 'While pundits in the West [are]...discussing the possibility of a separate 'Alawite state...one hears of no such thing from the 'Alawites themselves. Syria has long been their central project.'[34] Indeed, since most trans-state Arab–Islamic discourse and Arab governments backed the opposition, Arab nationalist discourse was eclipsed among Alawis in favour of a Syrian identity. In parallel, among the opposition, the Syrian identity initially promoted by secular moderates was marginalised as many exited the country, shifting the power balance to Islamic radicals whose supra-state Islamic identities were reinforced by trans-state Salafi discourse, fighters and funds. Thus, a polarisation developed between Alawi/Syrian state and Islamic supra-state identities constructed against each other. The state that had given birth to Arab nationalism now seemed to be digging its grave.

Conclusion

In the 1950s, as the Alawis were socially mobilised, their sectarian identity was overshadowed by integration into wider classes and political parties. Post-1963, they became driven by aspirations for social mobility and class-shaped ideology, and thus over-represented in the two current vehicles of power, the Army and the Ba'ath Party. From the 1960s, sectarian solidarity was reactivated by the intra-regime power struggles and by using sectarian connections to access clientele networks in Hafez al-Asad's neo-patrimonial state. Under

Hafez, Alawis became class-differentiated, but the revival of the security dilemma in the Islamic uprising of the 1980s kept their ʻ*asabiyya* alive. The Ba'ath regime's reliance on Alawi ʻ*asabiyya* cost it legitimacy among the Sunni majority; yet its Alawi core allowed it to survive repeated assaults from domestic and external opposition. Reliance on the Ba'ath regime enabled the Alawis to break out of poverty and get privileged access to power and economic opportunity. But conversely, grievances against the regime tended to taint the whole community and, insofar as the regime alienated the majority Sunni community, it put the security of all Alawis at risk.

6

THE SYRIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD'S ALAWI CONUNDRUM

Raphaël Lefèvre

After the Syrian civil war began in 2011, the international community's attempts to pressure Syrian factions to reach a political resolution paid great attention to the Alawi community's continued support for the government of Bashar al-Asad. What motivates staunch Alawi support for the regime remains poorly understood, yet it is typically characterised in monolithic and myopic terms. The Alawis, it is said, back the regime because they *are* the regime; its demise would be synonymous with their own demise. However, it is the fear of what may come next which appears to act as the primary driver of Alawi support for the Asad regime. This has become particularly evident since the country witnessed the rise of *jihadi* groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which have both engaged in fiery anti-Alawi rhetoric and sectarian killings. Yet the root of Alawi mistrust towards Sunni Islamism is long-standing, deeper and includes groups which are deemed to be fairly 'moderate' such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

In fact, much of this Alawi mistrust can be traced back to the late 1970s when a confrontation between the Brotherhood and some of its more radical

Sunni allies against the Alawi-dominated Ba'ath regime evolved into a violent sectarian battle, ending in the former's defeat and political exile. Since then, the Muslim Brotherhood has experienced a significant degree of political and ideological moderation. At the rhetorical level, in multiple statements, its leaders have called for the creation of a 'civil state' that protects the rights of minorities. At the political level, the organisation has sought to form alliances with members of religious minorities, including members of the Alawi community, within the Syrian opposition's representative bodies. To date, these efforts have failed to convince Alawis of the Brotherhood's proclaimed 'centrism' and new-found tolerance. The regime skilfully exploited this lingering suspicion. Within months of the Syrian uprising, while most Brotherhood members were excluded from anti-regime protests by virtue of their exile, Bashar al-Asad nonetheless declared, 'we have been fighting the Muslim Brotherhood since the 1950s and we are still fighting with them'.[1]

This chapter explains the complex relationship between the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Alawi community. First, by analysing the historical relationship between the two groups, it examines the political development of the Brotherhood in Syria, tracing the roots of Alawi antipathy towards Islamism. It subsequently describes the Brotherhood's recent attempts to cultivate the support of Syria's minorities by adopting a more inclusive political and ideological posture and rebranding itself as a 'centrist' Islamist force. Finally, it examines the effects of the re-emergence of the Brotherhood's military branch in 2011 on its relationship with Syrian Alawis.

A sectarian confrontation

The Muslim Brotherhood's 1979–82 *jihad* against the regime of Syrian President Hafez al-Asad marks a critical turning point in the organisation's development within Syria. The Syrian branch of the organisation was formed in the mid-1940s by Mustapha al-Sibai, a pupil of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna. In its early days, the organisation operated within the parameters of the democratic institutions of the newly independent Syria and participated in parliamentary politics.[2] However, the 1963 seizure of power by the Ba'ath Party changed the course of the organisation's development. The secular and increasingly authoritarian policies of the new regime antagonised various sectors of Syrian society from which the Muslim Brotherhood drew its support, including the *souk* traders, the urban middle class and the conservative Sunnis. Due to the Muslim Brotherhood's broad political base and

organisational capacity, the group was harshly targeted by the regime's security apparatus. 'As members of the Brotherhood,' a Syrian Brother now in exile commented, 'we then faced three options: we were either sent to prison, killed, or one after the other.'[3]

This crackdown accelerated the radicalisation taking place within the Brotherhood—a trend which culminated in a leadership change in 1975. From its official creation in 1946 until 1972, the organisation was led by Mustapha al-Sibai and Issam al-Attar, often remembered as moderate and pragmatic leaders who advocated participation in parliamentary politics and spurned paramilitary activities. The extent of their moderation is best evidenced by al-Attar's unequivocal condemnation of the riots which erupted in Hama in April 1964 against the Ba'athist regime. The uprising was led by Marwan Hadid, a young and undisciplined Muslim Brother, who took the liberty of arming the protesters, leading them into direct confrontation with regime troops. A close associate of Issam al-Attar remembers the way in which the Brotherhood's former leader reacted when he learnt of the uprising: 'while we were on a trip to Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, for a meeting of the international *tanzim* of the Muslim Brotherhood, Professor Attar and I learnt through the radio about the violent clashes in Hama before immediately and publicly denouncing the violence exercised on both parts'.[4] Nevertheless, the Ba'ath regime used Marwan Hadid's links to the Muslim Brotherhood as a pretext for exiling Issam al-Attar. The former leader recalls: 'the regime blamed me for Marwan Hadid's activism!'[5] This significantly undermined Attar's control over the Muslim Brotherhood, as bitterness toward the Ba'ath Party was growing, particularly in the wake of the regime's bombing of Hama's great al-Sultan mosque. By the late 1960s, Attar faced an internal challenge which forced him to relinquish leadership of the organisation.

The struggle for the control of the Brotherhood had not yet been fought on ideological grounds; however, due to Attar's exile in Aachen, West Germany, his decisions increasingly came under scrutiny, including his insistence on the maintenance of peaceful opposition toward the regime. Although his successor, Abdel Fatah Abu Ghuddah, was a widely respected Islamic scholar from Aleppo, he lacked the leadership skills to contain the growth of Islamic radicalism in Syria. Barely three years after his appointment he was replaced by the younger and more charismatic Adnan Saadeddine who originated from Hama. The group of more radical activists he headed would eventually precipitate an open confrontation between the Brotherhood and the regime. This coincided with the emergence of the Fighting Vanguard, a Syrian *jihadist* movement led

by Marwan Hadid. Following the events of April 1964, Hadid became disillusioned with the Muslim Brotherhood and began recruiting young men from his home town of Hama to wage a pre-emptive *jihad* against the 'infidel' regime. His campaign was intended to incite violent struggle between the Islamist movement and the Ba'ath Party. A prominent leader of the Syrian Brotherhood, originally from Hama, remembers his friendship with 'Sheikh Marwan': 'he was a brave Islamist militant: he had the temper of a true leader and had much influence on Hama's youth...but he was not very respectful of the organisation's rules; he wanted the Brotherhood to think less and to act more. In other words, [his ambition was to] revolutionise our organisation.'[6]

Hadid's sectarianism and hatred of the Alawis was unequivocal. He conflated the Alawi community with the Ba'ath regime, and disregarded the major role played by Sunni Ba'ath Party officers in the political system, such as Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass and Foreign Minister Abdel Halim Khaddam. When the Fighting Vanguard started a campaign of targeted killings at prominent regime officials, virtually all attacks were against Alawis or 'Nusayri dogs',[7] as they were referred to by Hadid. A prominent Sunni official recalls: 'all my Alawi friends, whether close to the regime or not, were afraid of seeing a plastic bag on their doorstep, possibly hiding a bomb'.[8]

When Hadid died in prison in 1976, the leadership of the Fighting Vanguard went to Abdel Sattar az-Za'im, another Hama-born Islamist. Most accounts acknowledge that az-Za'im professionalised the jihadi group's tactics and gave the Fighting Vanguard a national outlook by expediting the recruitment process in Syria's Sunni regions. Accounts also point to az-Za'im's lack of charisma, which ultimately led to the decentralisation of the group and the emergence of autonomous local emirs including Adnan Uqlah, a prominent member of the Fighting Vanguard from Aleppo.[9] In June 1979, Uqlah organised a major sectarian operation with the assistance of a Sunni Ba'ath Party officer in which they penetrated the Aleppo Artillery School, forced the cadets to gather in a hall and, separating them on the basis of their religion, gunned down 83 Alawi recruits and spared the remaining Sunnis. The attack escalated sectarian tensions in Syria and exacerbated conflict between Sunnis and Alawis. The regime blamed the Aleppo Artillery School massacre on the Muslim Brotherhood, designating it a 'terrorist' organisation. Although the Brotherhood officially condemned the attack, under Adnan Saadeddine's leadership the organisation had undeniably grown closer to the Fighting Vanguard.[10]

This growing alliance was partially the product of the regime's harsh repression against the Muslim Brotherhood. In March 1980, an uprising in Aleppo

was brutally repressed resulting in the death of several hundred people.[11] Within weeks, the Defence Companies, a Syrian Army unit specifically tasked with protecting the regime in Damascus, penetrated the Tadmor prison, where many Muslim Brothers were being held, and reportedly gunned down between 500 and 1,000 inmates.[12] Within a few days of the event, Law 49 of July 1980 made it a capital offence to belong to the organisation. Yet it seems that in a few Syrian cities particular bonds of loyalty and some ideological similarities linked Brotherhood members with Fighting Vanguard militants. Indeed, while the Brotherhood officially endorsed a policy of non-duplication of membership, the distinction between the groups was particularly blurred in Hama, from where the leadership of both groups originated. Commenting on an alliance that profoundly influenced the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's history, a prominent Islamist leader from Aleppo said: 'In all Syrian cities we would fire Muslim Brothers who flirted with the Fighting Vanguard. In Aleppo for instance, when we became aware that Adnan Uqlah followed regularly the circles of Marwan Hadid, we immediately fired him from the Ikhwan. However, in Hama, things were more confused as the local leadership there was more open to dual membership.'[13] In fact, a 1982 cable from the American Defence Intelligence Agency refers to Adnan Saadeddine's own deputy, Said Hawwa, as having been 'the assistant of Sheikh Marwan Hadid'.[14] A Brotherhood leader active in Hama further explains this troubling relationship: 'Abdel Sattar az-Za'im was a friend. The local branch of the Brotherhood was active in providing money and funds to the Fighting Vanguard which, in turn, benefited the families of those in Hama who had died fighting the Ba'ath regime.' He maintained, however, that: 'Not one penny went to help with the Fighting Vanguard's military activities. And personal friendships never meant a merger of the two groups.'[15]

These subtleties lost their relevance when, in October 1979, the Brotherhood waged its own *jihad* against Hafez al-Asad's regime and, in December 1980, collaborated with the Fighting Vanguard, establishing a 'Joint Command'.[16] In hindsight, many Muslim Brothers came to regret the formation of this alliance—which collapsed merely a year later—for it blurred the distinction between the two groups without bringing any significant military or political gains. It also had the consequence of planting the seeds of mistrust in the hearts and minds of many Alawis who questioned how a self-professed 'moderate' Islamist force that called for greater political and religious pluralism in Syria could form an alliance with a jihadist group that called for 'God's sovereignty on Earth' and condemned democracy and minority rights.[17] Some

even suggest that by not drawing any distinction between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Fighting Vanguard the regime exploited the issue and blamed a series of assassinations on the Islamists, such as the killing of Muhammed Fadl, an Alawi dissident who was the Dean of Damascus University.[18] These killings reinforced the highly negative perception that many Alawis held of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists more generally. Commenting on the reluctance of Syria's minority communities to countenance any political alternative to the regime, one prominent Alawi dissident explained: 'Syria is witnessing the resurgence of the minority's subconscious fear for survival, which emerged during the violence of the late 1970s and early 1980s.'[19] That fear, explained the dissident, illustrates the immense gap that exists between the Brotherhood's recent statement that it is a 'centrist'[20] Islamist force, and its lack of support among non-Sunni communities.

Opening a new chapter

Paradoxically, in terms of its politics and ideology, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is now considered as one of the more moderate Islamist movements in the region. Indeed, whereas Said Hawwa, the ideological artisan of the Brotherhood's radicalisation in the late 1970s, used to call for Syrian Sunnis to implement Ibn Taymiyya's *fatwa*—according to which it is permissible to spill the blood of Alawis[21]—current leaders advocate the creation of a 'civil state' in which citizenship and protection will be guaranteed to all religious and ethnic groups, including the Alawis. The group even calls for the Ba'ath Party's 1973 Syrian Constitution to be amended to make it possible for a non-Muslim to become president.[22]

This ideological shift was the product of decades of debate within the organisation concerning its failure to alter the course of Syrian politics. Indeed, the confrontation between the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the regime ended in February 1982 following a large-scale crackdown by Syrian security forces in Hama. In the course of a few weeks, between 10,000 and 40,000 civilians were killed, traumatising the political opposition.[23] The massacre forced the remaining Muslim Brotherhood fighters to escape from Syria and seek asylum in neighbouring countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Moreover, it initiated a significant conflict within the organisation over who was responsible for the bloodshed. According to a former leader: 'Hama was like an earthquake for the Muslim Brotherhood: the differences among us surfaced and some of us started looking for scapegoats.'[24]

The Hama massacre caused a split within the organisation between the Muslim Brothers in Aleppo, who renounced armed struggle and called for negotiations with the Ba'ath regime and the Hama leadership, which continued to advocate resistance and maintained its military operations against Ba'ath Party officers and installations inside and outside Syria. Unsurprisingly, by 1986, this clash provoked a leadership crisis and the two wings of the movement effectively separated. When they reunited in the early 1990s, one condition set out by the 'Aleppo faction' was for those who had previously favoured armed struggle to officially renounce violence. The shift was complete in 1996 when newly elected leader Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, who was from Aleppo, acknowledged the Muslim Brotherhood's past mistakes. In 2001, the publication of the National Honour Charter referred to the early 1980s as a 'long-gone phase and an era buried in history, which resulted from emotional spillage as well as misinterpretation and misunderstanding'.[25] The group went a step further in 2004 when it bluntly asserted that 'the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria has carried out a thorough review of its policies', stressing that 'basic freedoms and political and civil rights are no longer a matter of debate'.[26] In many ways, this evolution was best reflected in the changes experienced by the Brotherhood's own leader Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni. As a former military commander of the Brotherhood in Aleppo, he had escaped Syria for Amman and then London where his interaction with Islamists from other countries, such as *Ennahda's* Rashid Ghannouchi from Tunisia, had a profound impact on his thinking.

The Brotherhood showcased its good intentions in the mid-2000s when it participated in the Damascus Declaration alongside Christians, Alawis and Kurds. This was a wide coalition of independent figures and political parties who demanded political liberalisation in Syria. However, it was only with the advent of the Arab Spring and the beginning of the Syrian uprisings that the organisation seized the opportunity to demonstrate its moderation. Its approach to the uprisings was at first prudent. It welcomed the anti-regime movement whilst insisting that it did not 'own it'.[27] In parallel, some of its members played an important role in setting up new opposition structures, such as the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. Within these bodies, the Brotherhood attempted to form alliances with Christian, Kurdish and Alawi political dissidents. It also participated in the nomination of its members to important positions, such as leader of the opposition or ambassador to various countries.[28] At some points, these cross-sectarian and cross-ideological alli-

ances earned the Brotherhood unexpected praise from Alawi leaders who interacted with them in opposition forums. One prominent Alawi dissident recounted: 'they are conservatives, of course, but politically they are very open and this is particularly the case towards minority groups as they are desperate to showcase their good intentions'.[29]

The Brotherhood's willingness to demonstrate its 'centrist' credentials was further demonstrated in its financial and logistical support for Alawi dissident Sukrat al-Baaj, who organised a series of 'anti-sectarianism workshops'. This forum, which gathered prominent Alawi and Christian opponents of the regime as well as leading Syrian Islamists, was set up in June 2011. Its founding declaration states: 'Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, it was obvious to many that the Asad regime will attempt to use sectarianism to undermine the revolution of a people who have endured 40 years of brutality, corruption, injustice and backwardness. Therefore, a group of academics and national activists came together to establish a workshop aiming to expose and undermine the Asad regime's scheme and seeking to build a future for Syria based on justice, freedom and dignity for all its citizens.'[30] Amongst the participants on the Islamist side was the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, represented by Molham al-Droubi; the Syrian Religious Scholars Association, led by Sheikh Majd Mekkiy; as well as the Conference of Muslim Scholars, presided over by Sheikh Muneer al-Ghadban—both members of the Muslim Brotherhood—as well as independent Islamist personalities such as Haitham Maleh, Sheikh Adnan al-Aroor and Sheikh Murshid Ma'ashooq al-Khaznawi. The workshop then gathered all Sunni and non-Sunni participants on five other occasions between September 2011 and March 2013.[31]

The forum's significant achievements went largely unnoticed by a Western media that focused much attention on the narratives of Islamic radicalism and inter-communal sectarianism. The very act of gathering leading Alawi dissidents, Muslim Brothers and Salafi sheikhs known for their anti-Shi'a stance, such as Adnan al-Aroor, was in itself a remarkable achievement. More significant still was the content of the papers delivered at the workshop by the participants. Topics included 'The role of religion and *shari'a* scholars in the national unity and criminalisation of sectarianism'; 'Benefiting from international law during the process of legal reconciliation and the criminalisation of sectarianism'; 'A project to set up committees to protect areas from chaos'; and 'National reconciliation initiative to resolve the crisis in Syria'.[32] Two joint declarations were issued. The first came in the form of a published 'statement from the free Alawites', which called on their co-religionists to follow their

lead and renounce the regime. The second, entitled a 'Commitment from the Islamists to the minorities in Syria', came as a reassurance from the leading Sunni participants that a 'code of ethics' and 'transitional justice' would regulate their relationship with pro-regime Alawis and Christians in any post-Asad Syria. One of the Alawis who participated in the workshop commented: 'I was shocked by the positive attitude of the Muslim Brothers—they showed commitment to attending and participating in all sessions and even partially funded some of them.'[33] One Brotherhood leader, who played a central role in organising these seminars, confirms the healthy atmosphere in which they were held: 'We in the Muslim Brotherhood learnt from our history—we simply believe in the cause of the workshop which is to make it very clear that any use of sectarianism would be considered a crime.'[34] Ostensibly, a new chapter had opened in the relationship between Syria's Alawis—or at least some of them—and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood's self-professed conversion to centrism culminated in June 2013, when it announced the creation of a new political party, Wa'ad ('Promise'). Its membership is open to the Muslim Brotherhood, independents and also non-Sunni political figures.[35] Although initially the Brotherhood had wanted to set up its own Islamist political wing,[36] growing Islamic radicalisation inside Syria prompted the leadership to rethink its approach. By early 2013, it had been decided that the new party would be 'independent' from the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership, have a 'nationalist identity' and be 'open to anyone who wants to join'.[37] In June 2013, the party's political orientation was confirmed during its first conference, held in Istanbul, at which the 100 'founding fathers' pledged their commitment to transitional justice, parliamentary pluralism and the separation of powers. In fact, based on its official documents, it would be hard to tell that the Wa'ad party was Islamist at all. With the exception of asserting the need for 'judicial rulings to be compatible with Islamic *Sharia*', the party's political program is 'a model of liberal—even secular—values that effectively relegates Islam to the status of a cultural asset and a bond with other Arab and Islamic states'.[38] To make its inclusive outlook more reassuring to Alawis who might want to join, the Brotherhood introduced an internal mechanism limiting the group's participation to a third of the party's membership—leaving a third to 'independent Islamists' and a third to 'independent figures' (including some Christian and Alawi politicians). One of the founders of Wa'ad explains the thinking behind this mechanism: 'The message we try to convey is that we want to rebuild broken bridges in Syrian society. In order to make this real and attract some Alawis and Chris-

tians, we decided to make sure that the Brotherhood would not be in a dominant political position within the party leadership.'[39]

However, to date Wa'ad has failed to win the hearts and minds of Syrians—including the minorities and the Alawis in particular. One non-Sunni member of Wa'ad recounts that: 'I discovered that Wa'ad is actually behaving more like a political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood.'[40] Its official launch was delayed for several months at the 'demand of the Turkish ruling AK party',[41] casting doubts over its autonomy, and it has thus far failed to convince people of its independence from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Back to square one?

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's controversial history, particularly its alliance with the Fighting Vanguard, continues to taint its contemporary political image among minority communities. Many Alawis believe that the organisation issues inclusive statements and allies with some of Syria's exiled minority leaders, while at the same time it is preparing for a last-ditch sectarian battle on the ground. These fears have heightened since the Syrian uprising turned to civil war with the re-emergence of Islamist rebel brigades. However, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has thus far remained committed to its professed centrism even on military matters—at least for appearances' sake.

As the regime's response to the uprisings turned violent, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) rapidly developed as the most significant rebel umbrella organisation tasked with the defence of local communities. By March 2012, the exiled political opposition had explicitly endorsed the FSA and its principle of 'self-defence'. Evidence suggests, however, that some Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members were involved in courting armed groups by late 2011. At the same time, some Brotherhood figures supported former member Haitham Rahmeh, who was providing funding and material assistance to FSA fighters in and around his native city of Homs through a group called the Civilian Protection Commission (CPC). A Muslim Brother who was involved with the CPC explains: 'Given that the notion of armed struggle was still, at the time, rather controversial in opposition circles, the Brotherhood's leadership decided to temporarily decentralise decisions on this matter and leave it up to individuals to decide whether to engage or not in those types of activities.'[42] However, as the military struggle became more widespread in 2012, the entire leadership agreed to fund directly select rebel groups that shared the Brotherhood's moderate Islamist ideology, such as the Omar Al-Farouk Brigade in

Homs and the Liwa Al-Tawhid in Aleppo:[43] 'These two groups accepted our money and support at first', acknowledges another Syrian Brother close to the leadership. However, as wealthier donors emerged as supporters of the rebels, sources of funding diversified and these battalions became more autonomous. He concluded that: 'Even though they now make their decisions independently from us, we still enjoy good relations with both of them.'[44]

As time passed, looting, revenge and regime penetration became more common in certain FSA battalions. In the summer of 2012, following an ambiguous statement by a prominent Muslim Brother from Homs Molham Al-Droubi, rumours spread that the Brotherhood was frustrated with the situation and had formed its own rebel group.[45] Rebuking Al-Droubi, the leadership immediately denied that the Brotherhood had created any specific rebel groups. By January 2013, however, the organisation had acknowledged that some 'moderate' battalions had formed and made contact to coordinate activity.[46] Consequently, some 'centrist-minded' groups that placed their 'trust' in the Brotherhood were invited to a conference in Istanbul, where they gathered under the rubric of *Duroo al-Thawra* (Shields of the Revolution).[47] A high-ranking Muslim Brother explained that: 'the goal of the Shields is to unite all those who may be pious Sunnis, be they already members of the Brotherhood or not, and who are true nationalists and believe in a civil state'.[48] The political statements issued by the Shields echo this orientation. In its publications, the rebel platform claims to hail from a 'moderate, centrist-Islamist' background which binds it to notions such as observance of 'international law on human rights', commitments to 'democratic elections and dialogue' and the categorical rejection of 'all calls for *takfir*, mass murder and sectarian and ethnic discrimination'.[49] This was a direct message regarding its rejection of radical salafi and jihadist ideologies.

Mistrust of the Brotherhood's agenda persists, however, heightened by the group's reluctance to acknowledge officially that it directs, or at least heavily influences, the policies and operations carried out by the Shields. A prominent Alawi dissident suggested: 'If the Shields are the Brotherhood's new armed wing, then fine; but the fact that they are not prepared to confirm it on the record casts doubt on the group's real intentions.'[50] This concern is palpable in provinces such as Latakia, Homs and Hama that are home to substantial Alawi communities, many of whom remember the Brotherhood's radicalism of the early 1980s. This is reinforced by the emergence of Shields brigades that bear the name of former leaders of the Fighting Vanguard, such as the Battalion of the Hero Martyr Abdel Sattar az-Za'im. This may well be a public

relations operation on the part of some within the Brotherhood to remind Sunnis in and around Hama of the prominent role that local Islamists played in battling the regime over thirty years ago, but understandably it raises fear among the Alawi community. The Shields do not seem to have been directly involved in sectarian retributions or acts of extremism to date. They did not, for example, participate in the rebel attack of August 2013 against Alawi civilians in the Latakia region. This 'coastal campaign' involved leading opposition brigades, most of them linked to *salafi–jihadi* groups of an Al-Qaeda bent, which carried out the killing of a hundred civilians in at least a dozen Alawi villages of the Latakia province.[51] A high-ranking Syrian Brother argued: 'there are two million Alawis in Syria—not all of them are guilty of supporting the Asad regime; it would be wrong to blame the whole community for the deeds of a few'.[52]

Nonetheless, despite this reassuring rhetoric, there may be an issue in the medium and long term future regarding the outlook of the Shields. Indeed, because the group emerged within the space of only a few years, the Brotherhood did not necessarily have the time and resources to provide the in-depth religious and political education that it generally gives to its members. This prompted the Brotherhood's leadership to accentuate its efforts to ensure that the 'centrist Islamist' approach of the Shields is actually followed through on the ground. 'The issue of education is absolutely paramount to prevent extremism,' acknowledges a high-ranking Syrian Brother. 'So we are now sending moderate clerics to embed with Shields brigades and provide them with centrist guidance on issues of war and society; we are also sending trainers to accompany the fighters on the ground and make sure they all comply with the *shari'a* ethics code for struggle management—we take these issues very seriously even though it is sometimes a complicated process in the middle of a war,'[53] he explains. It still remains to be seen whether these reassurances will be enough to prevent the Islamic radicalisation of the Shields of the Revolution.

Conclusion

After three decades in exile, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has spent the last few years trying to restore its old networks within the country. It sought to position itself as a growing force, not only in exiled opposition politics but also in the military struggle on the ground. Since 2013, this attempt has been somewhat stymied by the rise of extremist Sunni groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. Yet the emergence of radical actors on the Syrian opposition

scene also provides the Brotherhood with a unique opportunity to demonstrate its 'centrist' ideology and to re-emphasise that its involvement with extremist actors in the early 1980s really does belong to the past. So far, members of the organisation have adopted a political discourse that is more nationalist than Islamist. They have also attempted to act as a bridge between the conservative Sunni constituencies and secular Syrians. Some of their initiatives, such as the rise of the Wa'ad party, support this approach. Further efforts on the Brotherhood's part to engage with Syria's religious minorities and to commit to political pluralism could eventually be instrumental in bringing forward a political settlement between the opposition and regime forces. However, the emergence of the Brotherhood's military offshoots inside Syria, such as the Shields of the Revolution, and the organization's refusal to give them public endorsement, casts doubt on its continued commitment to 'centrist' politics. To date, the statements issued by the Shields may well echo the Brotherhood's rhetorical moderation. Yet failure to provide Shield fighters with proper religious and political education will, sooner or later, test the group's dedication to its self-professed 'centrism'—this time on the ground, rather than in exile.

PART III

ALAWI COMMUNITIES, IDENTITIES AND POWER

7

ALAWI DIVERSITY AND SOLIDARITY

FROM THE COAST TO THE INTERIOR

Leon T. Goldsmith

The Arab Alawis of the Levant are a contradiction. They are an exceedingly diverse and fragmented collection of people who, despite apparent differences, displayed great solidarity during the Syrian uprising that began in March 2011. Like any religious group, the Alawis cannot be categorised in one-dimensional ethno-sectarian terms, yet formulating an exhaustive taxonomy for the sect's many faces is also difficult. To be Alawi means many things to different members of the sect, with multiple sources of overlapping identity including Arab, Muslim, Shi'a, Syrian, Turkish, Lebanese, urban, rural, working class and elite. In order to cut across these identities and provide an encompassing analysis of this religious community, it is helpful to divide the sect into two broad geographic categories: the Alawis of the *Sahel* and the Alawis of the *Dakhel* (literally translated as the coast and the interior). The former, for the purposes of this chapter, refers to the geographic heartland of the sect, which extends from northern Lebanon through the Syrian coastal region and into southern Turkey. The latter refers to those who live beyond this Alawi heartland, including in and around the interior Syrian cities of Homs, Hama, Damascus and Aleppo.

Alawi identity from the *Sahel* to the *Dakhel* is subject to opposing tendencies toward diversity and group solidarity. The diversification of Alawi identity is a positive variable in terms of Alawi integration in Syria, and is related to long-standing geographical, socio-economic and political processes. Most importantly, it is a product of the sect gradually overcoming its historic insecurity regarding Sunni Muslims, whose political and religious authorities periodically persecuted the heterodox Alawis.[1] Alawi solidarity, on the other hand, is a negative variable in assessing Alawi integration which stems from latent feelings of fear and insecurity,[2] and this can be related to a hesitant and circular urbanisation process, the political militarisation of the sect, perceptions of social rejection by the majority Sunni community, and also the potential for, and reality of, civil conflict. For the purpose of this study, the *Sahel* can be delineated by the physical barrier of the rugged coastal mountains of north-western Syria (Jabal al-Sahiliyah) (see Fig. 7.1). The region to the west of, and including, this range is the heartland of the Alawi sect, which represents the majority population in the area from northern Lebanon to southern Turkey.[3] Conversely, the *Dakhel* on the eastern side of the Syrian coastal mountains has been the domain of Sunni Muslims, who form the majority in urban and rural areas, extending from Damascus in the south, through the central cities of Homs and Hama, to Aleppo in the north.

Alawi concentration in the coastal and mountainous parts of north-west Syria is a result of their historic marginalisation from mainstream Islamic society, due largely to their allegedly *unorthodox* interpretation of Shi'a Islam, in particular their quasi-deification of the fourth Caliph and first Shi'a Imam, Ali ibn Abi Talib.[4] Abbasid persecution in the tenth century saw the Alawis dispatched from their main centre in Baghdad, which was the metropolitan heart of the Islamic world at that time, to the more peripheral regions of greater Syria.[5] Here the sect recovered and enjoyed a 'golden period' which lasted until the late eleventh century as the Alawis expanded freely across northern Syria, including into the urban centres of Aleppo, Tripoli, Beirut and as far south as Tiberius.[6] The arrival of the newly converted Sunni Muslim Seljuk Turks around 1070 brought this golden period to a close. The zealous Seljuks were intolerant of heterodox groups, and Alawis retreated from the cities to the inhospitable coastal mountains inland from Latakia.[7] Here they intermingled with other heterodox groups like the Shi'a and Christians and, over the following centuries, developed a resilient rural and exclusive identity as '*ibna al-jabal*' (sons of the mountain).[8] After seven-and-a-half centuries of relative isolation, between 1830 and the 1970s the Alawi community gradu-

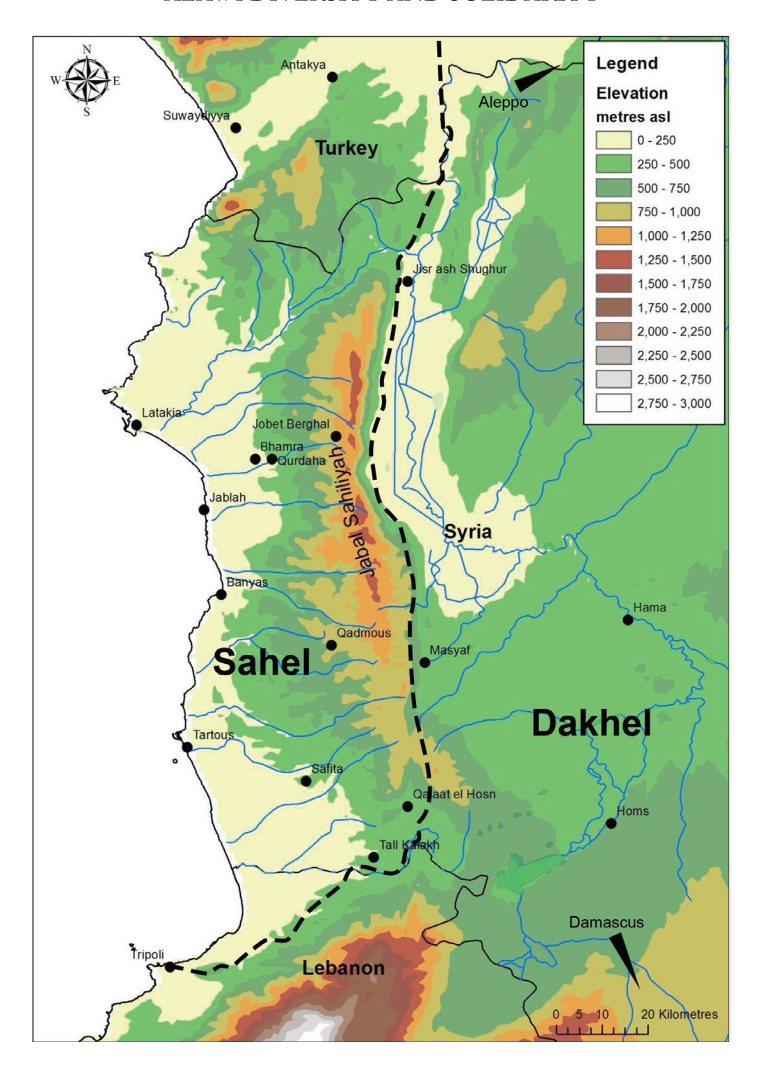


Fig. 7.1: The Sahel–Dakhel in north-west Syria

ally broadened its social and political horizons. This process began with Alawi strongmen exploiting the decline of Ottoman authority to assert themselves in the local politics of the *Sahel*. Starting in 1857 when American Protestants established missions on the Alawi territories, educational opportunities progressively opened up for the sect and these opportunities continued through the French Mandate, early Syrian independence and the Ba'athist period from

1963.[9] In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Alawis migrated in large numbers from the *Sahel* Mountains into the *Dakhel* to seek socio-economic opportunities. They were drawn by the prospect of employment in the industrial and public sectors, especially the military, but also by Arab nationalist and socialist political movements that were gathering momentum in Syria at the time.[10] Arab, socialist and rural-based political currents in Syria, including Ba'athism, showed great promise for Alawi integration in Syrian society, most notably through the formation of a class coalition with rural Sunnis.[11] Within two decades, the Alawi descent from the coastal mountains culminated in the ascent of one of their own to the Syrian presidency: the Ba'athist air force officer Hafez al-Asad. This signalled an incredible upgrade in the prospects of ordinary Alawis from rural poverty to the promise of upward urban mobility. The transition, however, was not entirely secure. Many Alawis harboured latent insecurity regarding the Sunni Muslim majority, especially after the conflict between the Syrian regime and the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood of 1976–82.[12] These internal convulsions were a setback for Alawi integration in Syria, which renewed Alawi insecurity and made them susceptible to manipulation as the Asad regime's praetorian mainstay. Therefore many Alawis never completely severed links with their rural origins, keeping open a return option. Yet by 2011, especially among the generation of Alawis born since the 1970s, the sect stood on the threshold of genuine sustainable integration in a diverse Syrian state.

In the early twenty-first century, Alawis number approximately 3–4 million, with 100,000–120,000 in northern Lebanon split between the rural Akkar region and the Tripoli suburb of Jabal Mohsen.[13] In the northern portion of the *Sahel*, Alawis total approximately 750,000 in the Hatay, Adana and Mersin provinces of southern Turkey.[14] The Alawis of north-west Syria constitute the great majority of the sect and possibly number as many as 2 million, distributed among the two main coastal cities of Latakia and Tartus and in hundreds of towns and villages in the coastal mountains and plains. The remainder of the Levant's Alawi community can be categorised as *Dakhel* Alawis. During the twentieth century the Alawis began to expand beyond their traditional territorial distribution into the wider Syrian region. While most Alawis remained in the *Sahel*, many came to be permanent inhabitants of the Sunni-dominated *Dakhel*. During the period of Ba'ath Party rule, from 1963 to the present, 14 percent of all Syrians migrated internally within Syria, with the great majority shifting from rural to urban areas.[15] In terms of the general population, urban numbers continued to increase at an annual rate of

2.4 percent in 2010, compared to rural population growth of just 0.8 percent.[16] *Dakhel* Alawis possibly numbered around half a million in Damascus by 2011, with a similar number resident in and around the central Syrian cities of Homs and Hama.[17]

Rather than representing a cleavage in Syrian Alawi society, the *Sahel–Dakhel* categorisation gives an indication of how persistent and sustainable the social and spatial integration of the Alawi sect is in wider Syria. The Syrian uprising that began on 15 March 2011 was a critical test of Alawi integration. As the Ba'athist state deteriorated in power and legitimacy, a key question was whether the diverse identities of the sect would allow it to maintain its integration within a changing Syria, or would latent insecurity compel Alawis back towards sectarian solidarity and conflict with the Sunni majority?

Sources of diversity

For a relatively small religious group, the Alawi sect comprises a remarkable number of overlapping and discrete sub-identities. Attempts to define the multiple faces of Alawi identity are further complicated by the long-standing ambiguity that the sect has purposefully cultivated. In 1697, British traveller Henry Maundrell commented on Alawi identity: '[The Alawis] are of a strange and singular character. For tis their principle to adhere to no certain religion, whatever it be, which is reflected upon them from the persons with whom they converse [...] Nobody was ever able to discover what shape or standard their consciences are really of.'[18]

In the early twenty-first century this concealment and obfuscation of identity remains very much part of Alawi social behaviour. Much more is known about the Alawi religion today, but Alawis are still extremely careful about openly displaying their religious identity, especially as they move into urban centres to seek social and economic advancement.[19] In order to unpack the various aspects of Alawi identity, four main factors of diversity can be examined: topography and connectivity, tribal identity and privilege, national divisions, and inequality amongst Alawis.

Topography and connectivity

From the beginning of their introduction to the Syrian coastal mountains in the eleventh century, physical geography has played a part in promoting difference among Alawis. The diffuse minority, which for centuries had been

spread across the Levant, became increasingly fragmented in terms of its social and political structure, despite technically becoming a compact minority in its mountain refuge.[20] This was partly a result of the nature of the terrain of the coastal mountains (Jabal al-Sahiliyah). The Jabal al-Sahiliyah rises just north of the Homs Gap near the Syrian border with Lebanon, and continues for around 100 kilometres, descending near the Latakia–Aleppo highway in the north (see Fig. 7.1). The range is highly 'folded and hummocky' with deep ravines and precipitous bluffs bisecting the area.[21] This mountainous terrain had the effect of compartmentalising the sect into different clans, tribes and loose confederations within isolated parts of the mountains.[22] Until 1930, the greatest population density was only 250 inhabitants in any one town or village.[23] This situation prevented any one individual or group from imposing uniformity across the sect as a whole.[24] While these conditions kept the sect internally fragmented, the coastal mountains, with a precipitous vertical displacement on their eastern side, also separated it from the urban centres of the interior, such as Homs and Hama.[25] Following the rise to power of Hafez al-Asad in 1970, considerable state resources were expended for the construction of roads and infrastructure to connect the different parts of the Jabal al-Sahiliyah, greatly improving connectivity within the core Alawi territory and also with the rest of the country.[26] Communal fragmentation can still be seen, however, in the persistence of Alawi sub-communal loyalties, which have the potential to produce variations in political behaviour amongst the sect.

Tribal identity and privilege

From the eleventh century to the twentieth century the Alawis' primary source of identity was the tribe. While tribal identity was gradually eroded by urbanisation, education and Ba'athist ideology, it remains relevant today. Throughout the period of Ottoman rule in the Levant, Alawi tribes frequently fought amongst themselves and did not strongly assert their common interests and identity as a religious sect. An Ottoman official once noted, 'it is well for the Sultan's government that these wild denizens expend [...] their strength in fighting each other than rebelling against the government'.[27] By the mid-nineteenth century, however, certain tribes were poised to establish their dominance and force greater Alawi unity. This was the case with Isma'il Khayr Bey, who established his supremacy among the Haddadin and Khayatin tribes in the region of Safita.[28] Perhaps sensing the threat posed by greater Alawi solidarity, the Ottomans eliminated Isma'il Khayr Bey in 1858 by conspiring with

one of his relatives.[29] A later influential figure among the Alawis was Suleiman al-Murshid, who from 1923 to 1946 established considerable power and influence in the *Sahel* via a breakaway religious movement. He also managed to achieve Alawi political representation in the *Dakhel* by gaining a seat in the Syrian parliament in Damascus. Al-Murshid's followers saw him as a prophet, creating an almost entirely new branch of the Alawi sect known as the Murshidiyya. Although they are not, technically speaking, a tribal group in themselves, they remain an important and distinct sub-group of the Alawi sect.[30]

From the 1960s, Alawi power shifted away from the other tribes and the Murshidiyya sect towards the Kalbiya and Haddadin tribal confederations. Concentrated in the heart of the *Sahel* in the Latakia district, these two confederations produced two political figures that had a great impact on Syrian politics in the 1960s: Salah Jadid from the Haddaddin tribes and Hafez al-Asad from the Kalbiya tribes.[31] While Jadid's influence came to an end during a power struggle within the Ba'ath Party in 1970, the Haddadin maintained their authority through the marriage of Hafez al-Asad to Anisa Makhlouf, daughter of an influential Haddadin family. Thereafter, the regime elite were statistically more likely to be from the Kalbiya or Haddadin tribes of the *Sahel*.[32]

While tribal and clan loyalties remained important among the Alawi elite for the selection of reliable personnel for key positions in the regime, for ordinary Alawis, who had begun shifting into the *Dakhel*, tribal identity increasingly lost relevance in their lives. Prior to their urbanisation, Alawis of both the coastal and interior plains held weaker attachment to tribal structures than the mountain Alawis. Moreover, Alawi urbanisation from the mid-twentieth century, which accelerated after the socialist Ba'athist revolution, caused many Alawis of the interior to become further detached from their tribal roots.[33] In general, tribal identity constitutes a source of diversity among Alawis; a route to greater career opportunities for those who have the right tribal connections; a possible source of resentment for those who do not; or an obsolete form of identity for the urbanised Alawis of the *Dakhel*.

National divisions

In addition to tribal diversity, the Alawis in the Levant are also separated by political geography. In the period 1920–39, within its core territory, the Alawi sect was divided between three new states: Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, each of which took quite different political courses.[34] In Turkey, democratic Turkish nationalism mixed with rigid secularism (but more recently moderate

Sunni Islamism) was the dominant political culture. Lebanon became a confessional democracy, where religious and sectarian identity was a fundamental element of the political system, and Syria, by contrast, emerged as a bastion of Arab nationalism where separate religious identities were suppressed in favour of Arab or Syrian identity. This geopolitical division added extra layers to Alawi identity, and the sense among Alawis of being Turkish, Lebanese or Syrian should not be underestimated. The differing experiences and national identities of Turkish, Lebanese or Syrian Alawis provide an extra source of diversity for the Alawi sect in the *Sahel*. Within their new state boundaries, the Alawi sect became separated ideologically and, gradually, linguistically.

It is quite natural in Lebanon to have strong twin identities based on being both Lebanese and a member of a specific religious community. It is the legacy of a long history of close coexistence of different religious communities, stretching back to the seventh century.[35] This coexistence was progressively institutionalised in the communal Règlement of the 1860s, the 1926 constitution and the 1943 National Pact that entrenched power-sharing on a sectarian basis.[36] Although the Lebanese Alawis did not receive formal recognition as a political community in Lebanon until 1992, consistent with the sectarian political system of their home country, they legitimately promote their interests as a sect. In this sense they are similar to other Lebanese religious communities, but quite different from Syrian or Turkish Alawis. Paradoxically, the fact that the Lebanese Alawis emphasise their particularistic religious identity is very characteristically 'Lebanese'.

The vast majority of the Alawi sect found itself within the borders of Syria. After the departure of the French mandatory power in 1946 and a period of political instability through the 1950s and early 1960s, the Ba'ath Party's rise to power in 1963 fostered a political culture which promoted strong Syrian and Arab identity. For Alawis, as well as other minorities, there were distinct advantages in embracing the Ba'athist ideology and submerging their Alawi identity, identifying themselves instead as Arab and Syrian.

In 1939, the northern portion of the Alawi heartland known as Alexandretta was incorporated into Turkey with the acquiescence of the French. With the exception of committed Arab nationalists like Zaki Al-Arsuzi, most Alawis who found themselves in Turkey soon learnt to appreciate the benefits of Turkish citizenship.[37] As one Alawi community leader in Antakya put it, 'we accepted Turkey and we succeeded and we are grateful to this day'.[38]

Turkish Alawis are becoming more immersed and integrated in the political culture of the Turkish Republic with every generation as Turkish education

and language displaces the Arab–Alawi identity of older generations. Among Alawi families in Antakya, it is common for parents to speak fluent Arabic while their children retain only a limited grasp of the language. One more generation could see the Arab language start to disappear among southern Turkey's Alawis altogether; that said, the flood of Syrian refugees into southern Turkey since 2011 may provide an unexpected boost to Arabic language in the region.

To Alawis, these geopolitical separations are not necessarily problematic. Alawis rarely comment negatively about the political division of the sect between three countries in its geographic heartland, and there is little evidence to suggest Alawi nationalist or separatist aspirations. Alawis have generally been content to allow for the integration and diversification of the sect's identity within the Lebanese, Syrian or Turkish political structures throughout the *Sahel*.

Inequality among Alawis

Prior to the twentieth century, the socio-economic structure of the Alawis could have been described as egalitarian.[39] Personal enrichment had, of course, been an objective of tribal strongmen like Isma'il Khayr Bey, but the rate of Alawi inequality has accelerated with each generation. In spite of the socialist ideology of Ba'athism, inequality among Alawis has only increased during Ba'athist rule. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, close relatives of the Syrian president and Alawi tribal barons exploited their political connections for financial advantages.[40] A patronage network, presided over by Hafez al-Asad and extending downwards among ordinary Alawis, prevented extreme levels of inequality, however, that might have caused dissension among the sect.[41] Following the transition of power from Hafez al-Asad to his son Bashar in 2000, the income gap rose to unprecedented levels. Bashar al-Asad pursued an economic strategy of 'market socialism', which tried to balance a centrally planned economy with the partial privatisation of state assets.[42] Without effective transparency and regulatory controls in place, the result was an enormous concentration of economic power in the hands of individuals close to the regime, while ordinary Alawis in the rural and low-level public sectors were increasingly neglected.[43] The president's cousin, Rami Makhlouf from the Haddadin tribe, for example, quickly grew to multi-billionaire status.[44] In contrast, ordinary rural Alawis and those working in low-level public sector jobs struggled economically, and their situation was

exacerbated by the severe drought which affected the country between 2006 and 2010.[45]

Growing economic inequality among Syria's Alawis led to perceptions of a widening gap in the level of power and influence between Alawis of the *Sahel* and *Dakhel*. Some *Dakhel* Alawis point to a discriminatory 'regionalism'; Alawis from the coast were seen to accrue disproportionate socio-economic benefits and key positions in the government and security services due to tribal, clan or territorial connections.[46] These perceptions of inequality within the Alawi community, particularly from the year 2000, contributed to a weakening of Alawi solidarity, or *'asabiyya*.[47]

Reactions to the uprising

These sources of diversity and a growing disaffection with the regime translated into mixed reactions to the Syrian uprising among Alawis. According to Alawi opposition activist Khawla Dunia, Alawis can be categorised as: pro-regime, pro-opposition, silent supporters of the opposition, and neutral.[48] Whether there is any clear correlation in these differing reactions to the uprising between the Alawis of the *Sahel* and the *Dakhel* is difficult to ascertain, although it is possible that less privileged and politically disconnected *Dakhel* Alawis are less likely to be strongly pro-regime. Organised opposition to the regime among Alawis of the *Dakhel* was demonstrated by the formation of the Party of Modernity and Democracy, which represented Alawis from the Hama district at an opposition conference in Antalya, Turkey on 1 June 2011.[49]

Alawis of the *Sahel* have exhibited strong signs of loyalty to the regime from the very beginning of the anti-regime protests. On Friday 25 March 2011, the night before the first protests in Latakia, Alawi youths circled the streets in their cars shouting pro-regime slogans and firing gunshots into the air.[50] This was both an expression of loyalty to the regime and an act of intimidation aimed at potential protesters. In Qardaha, the heart of the privileged Alawi coastal elite, the growing frequency of funerals for local security personnel has only increased loyalty and solidarity, as demonstrated in the common chant, 'We want no one but Asad!'[51] The regime is perceived among many coastal Alawis as the protector of both Alawi security and state unity, based on broad foundations of legitimacy, as illustrated by a comment from Alawi men in the town of Shaykh Badr, inland from Tartus: 'We don't believe in Hafez al-Asad because he was Alawi but because he was a great patriot...can any regime rule for forty years without the consent of its people?'[52] Alawis in Antakya, the

Turkish portion of the *Sahel*, have displayed similar views. An Alawi sheikh commented in March 2011: '[Bashar al-Asad] is working in the steps of his father; his father had prepared the route for him. He [Hafez al-Asad] practised the rights and justice in order to make no difference between Alawi and Sunni…but there are extremist people, people that were manipulated from outside, with corruption, they want to topple the regime.'[53]

Alawis of the *Sahel* are by no means uniform in supporting the regime, and some participated in early protests in Latakia and Baniyas.[54] *Sahel* Alawis who openly expressed sympathy for the opposition, however, often found themselves ostracised and subject to severe government pressure. One Alawi shop-owner from Baniyas described his predicament after he showed sympathy with the demands of protesters for real change. 'The regime wanted to hurt me to make an example for other people in the community…the neighbourhood is split: half are dejected and subservient, the rest are beasts.'[55] Other notable coastal Alawis who openly joined the opposition include dissident writer Samar Yazbeck, who tried to open different dialogues between Alawi sheikhs and opposition movements, and the poet Rasha Omran.[56]

In the *Dakhel*, many Alawis participated in protests in Damascus and peaceful demonstrations in Homs' Clock Square;[57] they looked to distance themselves from the regime and sought to promote Alawi interests for political reform and pluralism in the context of the Syrian uprising. Sunda Suleiman from Hama, who claimed to represent *Dakhel* Alawi interests at an opposition conference in Antalya, on 1 June 2011, argued that the regime had manipulated Alawi insecurities and that the sect's best prospects lay in embracing a path towards a 'liberated democratic' Syria.[58] Prominent Alawi religious sheikhs from Homs reportedly echoed this perspective and tried to distance the sect from the regime in September 2011, after the government's crackdown on the opposition movement intensified.[59]

Many ordinary Alawis of the *Dakhel* simply felt trapped and were ambivalent about both the regime and the opposition.[60] It was only a matter of months from the start of the uprising before *Dakhel* Alawis began to perceive themselves as being more vulnerable than their counterparts on the Alawi-majority coast. Feelings of exposure to a possibly revanchist Sunni majority pushed many of these *Dakhel* Alawis into at least tacit support for the regime. Many were primarily motivated by practical concerns about preserving their livelihoods in public sector jobs, and the safety of their family members in the security forces.[61] By mid-2013, possibly as many as 11,000 Alawis in the security forces had been killed.[62]

While there is no clear correlation between differing Alawi reactions and the sect's various social, political or geographic circumstances, urbanised *Dakhel* Alawis, lacking the political connections of the Alawis of the coast, were initially the most likely to have opposition sympathies, or at least show greater ambivalence towards the regime. In contrast, Alawis of the *Sahel*, with their stronger territorial, tribal and socio-economic connections to the state, were more likely to be staunchly supportive of the regime, albeit with notable exceptions. The general trajectory, however, was that the broad spectrum of Alawi identities and political behaviours began to converge on sectarian solidarity.

Sources of solidarity

Countering the diversification of Alawi identity, several factors have induced greater solidarity among Syria's Alawis. Firstly, Alawi urbanisation was tentative as a result of the realisation of their common points of difference from Sunni urban society. This led Alawis to maintain a circular rural–urban lifestyle: effectively hedging their bets when it came to migrating into the cities of the *Dakhel* by never completely severing ties with their ancestral Alawi-majority towns and villages. Consequently, Alawis tended to stick together for moral support within the urban environment, which created perceptions among other Syrian communities of Alawi sectarianism. Another factor was the militarisation of the sect beyond their limited tribal solidarities of the pre-independence period. The gradual process of Alawi involvement in the Syrian military in the post-Ottoman era ultimately resulted in a broad Alawi *'asabiyya* mobilised in support of Asad's rule in 1970. Thirdly, a persistent perception of Sunni religious chauvinism and intolerance toward the Alawi sect pushed the group together in a joint state of insecurity, especially in times of political upheaval. A final factor that induced Alawi unity was the descent into civil war in Syria from mid-2012 onwards, which only heightened Alawi insecurity and solidarity and gravely threatened the prospects for future Alawi integration in Syria.

Hesitant urbanisation

After 1,000 years of exclusion from Syria's urban areas, Alawis were understandably cautious in their approach to urbanisation, meaning they remained unsure of their security and acceptance in the predominantly Sunni Muslim urban interior. As a result, Alawi urbanisation had two key dimensions: firstly, while, over time, urbanisation became a driver of diversification of social experience

and identity, initially it had worked to make Alawis more aware of their common identity. The late Syrian scholar, Hanna Batatu, best explained the process of mutual support among rural minorities whose natural tendency was to come together in the uncertain and alien urban environments of the *Dakhel*:

> In Syria [...] disadvantaged or previously disadvantaged rural [...] people—representing a level in social evolution different than that of relatively long established urban groups—tend in their political actions to adhere to or cooperate more markedly with kinsmen or members of their own clan or people from their own sect, or region, this is not so much a manifestation of narrow cliquishness, although their behaviour bears this aspect, as it is they are really acting in a natural manner, merely obeying, so to say, the logic of their fundamental structural situation.[63]

Secondly, Alawi urbanisation was circular, with most families retaining very strong links to their rural villages. This is applicable to both *Sahel* and *Dakhel* Alawis. Many Alawis have dual residences in the sprawling suburbs of Latakia and in their home villages in the Jabal al-Sahiliyah, with hundreds of daily minivan services shuttling back and forth from the city to the Jabal. Although some *Dakhel* Alawis claim to have severed links with their rural origins, many also maintain similar dual lifestyles between Hama or Homs and their villages of origin in the southern and eastern parts of the Jabal Sahiliyah.[64]

The circularity of Alawi urbanisation is not unique in rural–urban migration patterns—similar patterns exist among the Shi'a of southern Lebanon or the Igbo of Nigeria—but what is significant in the Alawi case is that a primary motive for Alawi rural–urban circularity is derived from (latent) insecurity rather than economics.[65] The need to keep a refuge open in the *Sahel* and mountain villages is directly linked to the possibility of 'dangerous' political upheaval in the interior. In 2005, the Syrian regime faced heavy international pressure after it was accused of involvement in the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri. The withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon that same year resulted in a serious internal crisis for the regime, and Alawis began to think about the option of retreating to their *Sahel* heartland. In October 2005, correspondent Anthony Shadid was told by an Alawi from the coast that, in the event of a regime collapse, 'the people in Damascus will return to the village and they'll find protection with their people'.[66] Overall, this impulse to retreat back to their historic refuges acts as a counterweight to the process of genuine social integration. In a repetition of the Alawi response to the Muslim Brotherhood revolt of 1976–82, many Alawi security and military personnel in Damascus have sent their families to the coast or mountain villages for safety since the onset of the Syrian civil war.[67]

Mobilisation and militarisation

From the time of the French Mandate, Alawis began to be incorporated into the military establishment of Syria. The militarisation of the group was an activator of Alawi solidarity. Initially, many poor rural Alawis were enlisted in the Troupes Speciales, a colonial force which played a major role in putting down nationalist dissent.[68] From this period, the Alawi community was tainted with having collaborated with the French colonial power, and this only served to increase communal cohesion.[69] After Syria gained independence in 1946, the remnants of the Troupes Speciales were absorbed into the new national armies of independent Syria and Lebanon[70] and Alawis continued to be well represented in the lower ranks of the Syrian Army.[71] The Syrian military academies, which had largely been closed to poor, uneducated Alawis during the French Mandate,[72] became one of the few 'avenues for upward mobility'[73] for Alawi youths, and they enlisted in high numbers.[74]

Gradually, through a complicated process of *coups* and purges in the Syrian military between 1949 and 1970, Alawi over-representation in a politicised Syrian Army created the conditions for the mobilisation of Alawi sectarian *'asabiyya*. For Hafez al-Asad, Alawi solidarity within the armed forces became an important factor in the consolidation of his rule. The effectiveness and durability of the mobilisation of Alawi solidarity has been displayed since the outbreak of conflict in 2011; for example, the frequency of Alawi military desertions has been very low.[75] Moreover, the scale and persistence of the 2011 uprising activated more overtly sectarian elements to the militarisation of the Alawi sect through the creation of local militias and irregular forces known as *Shabiha*. Completing the sectarian military mobilisation of Alawis, in January 2013 the Asad regime organised the various Alawi militias into loyalist armed units called 'National Defence Forces'.[76]

Perceptions of Sunni chauvinism

An important source of Alawi solidarity is a tendency to be concerned about the potential for Sunni Muslim socio-religious chauvinism. Alawi anxiety about the intentions of a dominant Sunni majority is a major element in Alawi thinking. A survey published in 1995 showed that out of a sample of 100 Alawis, 91 felt persistent insecurity and fear about their long-term situation as a minority in the Arab world.[77] Demonstrative of this latent insecurity was a comment by an Alawi sheikh in early 2011: 'the Sunnis don't like the Alawis. The Alawis like all the people, everyone. But the Sunni only like the Sunni. You tell them this one is Alawi and they will tell you he is not a Muslim.'[78]

During the time between the rise of the Asad regime in 1970 and the start of the 2011 crisis, there were two key episodes that piqued Alawi insecurity concerning the Sunni majority. In 1973, Hafez al-Asad's proposals for a new constitution did not stipulate that the president had to be a Muslim.[79] The subsequent riots and protests by Sunni Muslims in the interior cities of Hama, Aleppo and Damascus showed Alawis, and other religious minorities, that their integration and acceptance in a 'secular Syria' remained elusive.[80] The second (more serious) episode was the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Asad regime from 1976 to 1982. In particular, Alawis feared reprisals for the mass military assault in Hama that saw the regime finally crush the revolt in February 1982. To this day some Alawis suspect that the Syrian uprising was planned and orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood, perhaps seeking to reverse its defeat in Hama.[81]

Alawi uncertainty about Sunni intolerance was palpable in the years preceding the uprising in Syria. In 2009–11, a rising level of insecurity about religious and social identity began to reveal itself. The distinctions between religious groups were, for example, stark during Ramadan (the month-long annual Muslim religious holiday), largely between those who were observing the obligatory fasting during daylight hours and those who were not. These types of seemingly superficial insecurities and social tensions revealed deeper anxieties and conflicting perceptions of identity, which escalated to new heights during the 2011 Syrian uprising.[82] Christa Salamandra notes that in Syria 'the term Alawi can often imply class and religion'.[83] The sensitivities of Alawis concerning the Sunni community's attitudes toward their rural, peasant origins were aggravated by demonstrators in Latakia reportedly chanting in 2011 that they wanted to 'send Bashar back to the farm'.[84]

Despite these insecurities, the presence of Alawis alongside Sunnis in anti-regime protests in 2011 challenged wider Alawi perceptions of Sunni religious chauvinism. The Alawis of the *Dakhel*, with greater prospects for interaction and greater experience of living with the Sunni majority, were perhaps more likely to believe that the uprising was not about religion or sectarianism. For instance, a young Alawi from Homs, calling himself Fadi, was 'excited' to join a large anti-regime demonstration in Homs' Clock Square.[85] When the well-known Alawi actress Fadwa Suleiman joined the protesters in Homs, the positive reception she received in joining anti-regime demonstrations defied notions of Sunni sectarianism.[86] For the regime, these types of incidents threatened broad Alawi support for the political status quo. The protests in Homs were dispersed with live fire in April 2011, and Suleiman went into

hiding; troops were dispatched in Homs to try and secure her in November 2011.[87] The deadly crackdown in Homs created anger among the Homs Sunni community, which resulted in calls for *jihad* from the mosques, and sectarian-based attacks and kidnappings began to occur on both sides. These events strained the cross-sectarian nature of the protest movement in Homs, and both Alawis and Christians—as minorities—began to fear a shift toward a religious struggle in Syria, which saw them gravitate towards support for the regime.[88] By the time the government launched its offensive against rebel positions in Homs, in July 2013, regime forces enjoyed reliable support from the city's Alawi neighbourhoods.[89]

Turn to civil war

Alawi perceptions of the nature of the uprising were critical in the outbreak of civil war. The events in Homs in 2011, described above, show how fear and insecurity caused formerly integrated Sunni and Alawi communities and a mixed protest movement to become polarised around sectarian identities. In the *Sahel*, similar dynamics were evident early on in the uprising. On 25 March 2011, the first protests occurred in the regime stronghold of Latakia. Peaceful protesters chanting 'freedom' were fired upon by unknown gunmen. The crowd dispersed in panic and, according to Syrian government sources, twelve people including security forces and protesters were killed.[90] For coastal Alawis, this rapid turn of events from peaceful demonstrations to lethal violence fed perceptions of threat from armed 'extremist groups' that the government had feared.[91]

Three months before the start of protests in Syria, the regime began to alert Alawis to the rising threat of Sunni extremism; an Alawi colonel from Homs related that immediately after the start of the revolution in Tunisia, in December 2010, he received orders to be on standby against attacks from 'Islamist radical groups'.[92] These warnings of Islamic extremism activated latent insecurities among the Alawi community about the potential for Sunni revanchism. A critical moment in the Syrian uprising was the first major battle between defectors from the security forces and government troops at the town of Jisr ash-Shugour on 4 June 2011.[93] This marked a turning point toward civil war in an uprising which until that point had been characterised by peaceful protests.[94] The Syrian government has long linked any political destabilisation in the country with the danger of civil conflict and sectarianism.[95] For many Alawis of both the *Sahel* and of the *Dakhel*, this message was convincing as it

appeared to be supported by the sectarian violence that had broken out in neighbouring Lebanon in 1975 and in Iraq after 2003.[96] Moreover, the turn to civil war in Syria following the 2011 uprising so far also seemed to support the regime's narrative of 'status quo or sectarian conflict'.

By mid-2012, many Alawis felt that the regime's warnings about the threat of terrorism and religious extremism had proved to be correct.[97] Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), became more heavily involved in the conflict, and secular opposition and moderate Islamist forces were gradually supplanted by radical Islamists. The spectre of radical Sunni fundamentalism, intolerant of heterodox sects, shored up Alawi support for the regime in both the *Sahel* and *Dakhel*. The increase in sectarianism and the decline of moderate opposition solidified Alawi identity and political behaviour, leading many Syrians, including some opposition Alawis,[98] to suggest that the Syrian regime had employed a deliberate strategy to provoke sectarian conflict.[99]

Conclusion

While not a linear process without major setbacks, from the mid-twentieth century the Alawi sect's social interaction and spatial distribution progressively broadened from its territorial heartland in the *Sahel* into the Sunni-dominated urban interior. By 2011, Alawis could be found in the main urban areas of the *Dakhel*, often in mixed neighbourhoods. The urbanised *Dakhel* Alawis were a potential weak link in Alawi *'asabiyya*; they were more integrated into wider Syrian society and felt less attachment to the regime, which many of them believed only privileged Alawis of the *Sahel*. Living within the Sunni urban heartland of the Syrian interior, however, *Dakhel* Alawis also felt more vulnerable when the uprising turned toward civil war. This common sense of insecurity has forced Alawis of both the *Sahel* and *Dakhel* into similar positions of at least tacit support to the regime.

The contradiction between diverse Alawi identity but ultimately cohesive political behaviour regarding the Syrian uprising is a result of the sect's persistent sense of insecurity. A major split in the Alawi sect would have had the effect of arresting the descent toward sectarian conflict. Given the number of Alawis spread through the government security forces, for example, a major split in the Alawi sect in terms of loyalty to the regime could have significantly weakened the military power of the government and lessened its ability to counter the uprising through state repression. A conversation up a stairwell in the contested

Damascus suburb of Daraya, between an opposition fighter and an Alawi soldier in the Syrian Army in April 2013, exemplified the security dilemma influencing Alawi political behaviour: the opposition fighter argued that the opposition only wanted to remove Bashar al-Asad and had no problems with Alawis. In turn the Alawi soldier revealed his insecurities about the nature of the opposition and the prospects for Alawis like him in a post-Asad Syria.[100] This exchange symbolises how insecurity lies at the centre of the contradictions in Alawi identity between diversity and integration, solidarity and conflict.

As the Syrian crisis entered its fourth year in 2014, Alawi concerns over the potential for persecution at the hands of the Sunni majority have magnified as radical Islamist groups grew in strength at the expense of moderate opposition forces. The longer the conflict continues, the more remote becomes the prospect of a resumption of sustainable Alawi integration in post-war Syria.[101] Despite the regime's seemingly strong military position in early 2014,[102] a series of 'terrorist-style' bombings in Alawi neighbourhoods in Homs, since 6 March 2014, demonstrates the threat that Alawis who remain in the *Dakhel* are likely to face in the future.[103] In the final analysis, the struggle to preserve the Asad regime has led to escalating sectarianism, civil war and religious extremism, all of which threaten to reverse the long process of Alawi diversification and integration in Syria. The most likely scenario for Alawis in the coming years will be a social retreat into sectarian solidarity and a spatial retreat back into their territorial heartland in the *Sahel*.

8

PATRONAGE AND CLIENTELISM IN BASHAR'S SOCIAL MARKET ECONOMY

Alan George[1]

Sunni businessmen in Damascus were complaining that 'a *predominantly Allawite* [sic] *"corrupt" class has become entrenched...and is using the corrupt system to dominate all levels of business*', reported a confidential US Embassy cable in January 2006. It added that '*the Asads run Syria as a family business*'. The precise extent of Alawi involvement in the 'corrupt class' is debatable; but certainly patronage and clientelism in the Asads' Syria has emanated from the ruling family, which is Alawi, and from its immediate circle, many of whose key members have been Alawi. It has been a far cry from the official rhetoric, where the economy was run for the benefit of 'the people', and where corruption was an intolerable aberration. How best to manage the 'family business' has been a central issue in the country's politics, with competing positions reflecting pragmatism and practicalities—not to mention narrow self-interests—at least as much as ideology. Throughout, however, the 'corrupt class' has prospered.[2]

Central to the rhetoric of Syria's Ba'athist regimes has been a commitment to a centrally-directed 'socialist' economy. Ever pragmatic, Syrian President

Hafez al-Asad, who ruled from 1970 until his death in 2000, paid lip service to economic reform. Fearful that fundamental economic change might have negative political consequences for his power base, he restricted those reforms to measures that were slow, halting and contradictory. In practice, state control was not always pursued with real vigour, but by 2000, when Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father, the public sector dominated much of its economy. Inefficiencies and corruption were rife. State-owned enterprises, often loss-making, were generally over-manned and directed by managers appointed for their loyalty to the party rather than their business acumen. Every sector was bound by rules and regulations, and administered by a vast bureaucracy that featured the same deficiencies as the rest of the public sector. The Syrian economy survived during this period due to exports from oilfields developed in the 1980s, financial subventions from the oil-rich Gulf states, remittances from Syrians working abroad, military and other aid from Syria's Soviet bloc allies and, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, from Russia. Unemployment was endemic, especially amongst younger Syrians.

The pre-civil war period of Bashar al-Asad's rule was marked by an economic liberalisation programme that aimed to create competition, though not at the expense of social welfare. While presented as a bold visionary initiative, the programme was in fact reactive. The regime understood that Syria's sclerotic command economy had failed, the oil revenues that kept it afloat would soon end and private enterprise offered the only prospect of relief. Until 2005, while Bashar was consolidating his position, his reforms were little different in style and substance from those introduced by his father. The main beneficiaries were corrupt regime insiders operating in alliance with a new business class. Their increasingly ostentatious wealth was based on monopolies over particular sectors rather than competition, ultimately enforced by the security agencies upon which the regime depended. After 2005, under the stewardship of Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah al-Dardari—the acknowledged architect of the country's economic liberalisation programme—the reform process intensified. The aim was to create what was termed a 'social market economy'. Fierce opposition from the Ba'ath Party and other key pillars of the state severely hampered this process. The entrenched corrupt business networks embraced reforms from which they would benefit while bitterly resisting others. Real changes were nevertheless achieved, at least at the macro level, but at the cost of widening wealth disparities and without any impact on unemployment levels. It would be going too far to assert that the country's economic woes were the cause of the 2011 uprising, but they certainly provided a context richly conducive to rebellion.

The regime's rhetoric

Syria's economic performance under Hafez al-Asad 'fluctuated sharply', and he responded by issuing 'laws, decrees and decisions that were sometimes experimental and sometimes improvised… [or simply] a reaction to a certain situation'. During Bashar al-Asad's inauguration speech, he admitted that there had been 'no clear strategy' in the past and promised to deliver reform by 'modernising' Syrian laws, 'removing bureaucratic obstacles to the flow of domestic and foreign investments, mobilising public and private capital and activating the private sector and giving it better business opportunities'.[3] So when the thirty-four-year old inherited the presidency, there was optimism that Syria's political and economic systems might at last change for the better. Even before his father's death, articles critical of the economy and the inefficiencies of the state's vast stultifying bureaucracy had appeared in the state-controlled media (there was no other). Syria was and would remain a police state, however; one in which the ruling family essentially held power via multiple and brutal security agencies. Criticising the system's fundamentals and the absolute authority of the president remained taboo. Syrians who failed to acknowledge this risked detention and torture, but the margins of debate over the country's political and economic priorities had widened even before Bashar assumed his father's mantle.

For a few brief months after Bashar's accession—the so-called Damascus Spring—it seemed as if the promise of real change might be fulfilled, in both the political and economic spheres. Throughout Syria, democracy, human rights and the rule of law were openly debated in hundreds of new 'civil society forums', most of them hosted in private houses. A 'Statement of 99' published in the London-based pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*, signed by 99 Syrian intellectuals, artists and professionals demanded: an end to the State of Emergency that had been in effect since 1963; a public pardon for all political detainees and exiles; and the establishment of a 'state of law' that would 'recognise political and intellectual pluralism'. This was followed in January 2001 by a 'Statement of 1,000' (although it had been leaked and published before all the signatures had been gathered). Unlike the Statement of 99, it explicitly called for the establishment of a multi-party political system and questioned the Ba'ath Party's lead role in government. In early 2001, however, the regime reverted to type; the forums were shut down and leading pro-democracy activists arrested.[4] In a landmark interview with the London-based Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, on 8 February 2001, the president dismissed the activists (just as he would dismiss the protesters of spring 2011) as spies and fools

serving the interests of Syria's enemies. He affirmed that 'economic development is the focal point of the discussion today in Syria'.[5]

In April 2009, during a visit to Vienna, the president declared: 'We in Syria today are witnessing an all-out economic reform phase based on trade liberalisation, an increased role for the private sector [and] improvement of the investment climate'. Echoing the theme of 'change within a framework of continuity' that had been central to the regime's rhetoric from the outset, Bashar added that: 'We have not resorted to the principle of a shock. Rather, we have resorted to the principle of a step-by-step economic reform. We might not be the fastest... [but] our steps are stable and well-calculated.'[6]

Syria's economy did indeed change in 2000–10 but the changes were often incoherent. As in the time of Hafez al-Asad, measures taken were reactive to immediate needs rather than proactive. To an extent, the old command economy system was liberalised and the previously reviled private sector was designated as the engine of future economic growth. Contracts and other financial benefits were channelled directly to businessmen close to either the ruling family or senior officers of the state security agencies. Partly, perhaps—for there is no hard evidence—this was done as a means of cementing regime security as it provided key figures with powerful incentives to maintain the *status quo*. In the early years of Hafez al-Asad's rule, cronyism was notably more discreet and limited in scope. Later, a corrupt *tabaqa jadida (*new class) emerged and during the Bashar era this group was unrestrained, flaunting its wealth while at the same time articulating the rhetoric of free enterprise.

The limited nature of Bashar's economic reforms is illustrated by Syria's standing in international political and economic performance indices. In 2011, despite a decade of 'liberalisation', 'modernisation' and 'reform', to use the regime's buzzwords, Syria was ranked 144 of 183 countries in the World Bank's 'ease of doing business' league table.[7] In the Global Competitive Index for 2011–12,[8] Syria came 98 of 142. In 2003, the first year in which Syria featured in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, it came 66 of 133 countries,[9] but by 2010 it had fallen to 127 out of 178 countries.

The macro economy

Historically, analysing Syria's economy has been plagued by inaccurate or misleading statistics. In particular, official figures omit the shadow (illegal) and informal (unregistered) economies, the activities of which range from smuggling to unrecorded employment on farms. At the turn of the century, this accounted for some 40 percent of GDP and 43 percent of the real labour

force. To evade tax, it was routine for smaller businesses to maintain parallel accounting records.[10] Abdullah al-Dardari was at the heart of Syria's economic liberalisation efforts in the 2000s, first as head of the State Planning Commission in 2003–4 and then as Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs in 2005–11. He insists that by 2010, reforms including the rationalisation of subsidies had effectively eliminated the shadow economy, while steps had been taken to include informal activities in official GDP figures. 'By then, the statistics were capturing the realities' of the Syrian economy, he claims, having accepted the point that '20–25 percent of Syria's GDP was informal'.[11]

Defined by the World Bank as a 'lower middle income' country, Syria has a relatively diversified economy. In 2010—the year before the uprising that led to civil war and consequent severe economic disruption—GDP totalled $59.1 billion. Real annual GDP growth averaged 4.3 percent in the 2000–10 period, with a high of 6.9 percent in 2004 and a low of –2.1 percent in 2003 (see Table 1). Crucially, however, per capita GDP grew more slowly, reflecting the country's rapid population growth of around 2.5 percent each year in the 2000–10 period. Syria had 16 million people in 2000 and 20.4 million by 2010. While the population increased by 27.5 per cent, per capita GDP (at constant prices of 2005) grew by only 22.7 per cent, from $1,385 in 2000 to $1,700 in 2010.[12] No less crucially, this growth was not evenly distributed. A widening income gap was an inevitable consequence of the government's reforms, and a high proportion of economic growth was captured by a small minority close to the regime. In 2004 the wealthiest 10 percent of the populace accounted for 28.9 percent of consumption, while the poorest 10 percent accounted for just 3.4 per cent.[13]

Table 1: Real Syrian GDP growth (%)[14]

Year	*GDP growth*
2000	2.3
2001	3.7
2002	5.9
2003	– 2.1
2004	6.9
2005	6.2
2006	5.0
2007	5.7
2008	4.5
2009	5.9
2010	3.4

Traditionally, agriculture was a pillar of the economy and the single biggest source of employment. In 2000–10 it accounted for around 20 percent of GDP, with a high of 27 percent in 2001 and lows of 17 percent in 2008 and 16.5 percent in 2010.[15] From 2006 to 2010 agriculture was badly hit by a severe four-year drought, especially in north-eastern Syria, the impact of which was exacerbated by the poor management of water resources. Some 1.3 million people were affected, of whom 800,000 had their livelihoods devastated, with small farmers the worst hit.[16] There is no definitive estimate, but certainly several hundred thousand Syrians migrated to already overcrowded cities because of the drought.[17] As well as causing huge suffering, the drought—often cited as a potential contributory factor to the 2011 uprising—seriously hampered the regime's economic reform project. Employment in agriculture was halved, from 32.9 percent of the national labour force in 2000 to a mere 14.3 percent in 2010.[18] Industry, largely concentrated in Aleppo, was relatively small-scale with an emphasis on the processing of agricultural products, foods and chemicals. In 2010 it accounted for about 7 percent of GDP[19] and around the same proportion of the labour force.

Oil played a decisive role in the economy. In the early 1970s, at the start of the Asad family's rule, Syria produced only 120,000 barrels per day (b/d) of low quality oil from fields in the north-east. During the 1980s, however, newly discovered fields of high quality crudes in the Euphrates valley bolstered production and the national output reached 582,000 b/d in 1996. Since then it has steadily declined, falling to only 385,000 b/d in 2010.[20] The financial impact, however, was offset by higher global oil prices. In 2005 the US Embassy in Damascus reported that oil accounted for 'approximately 20 percent of GDP, 65–70 percent of exports and 50 percent of government revenue'.[21] These figures, like many relating to the Syrian economy, must be treated as indicative only. Much economic activity remained informal or illicit and is therefore not recorded in official statistics. IMF data issued in 2010 shows that oil accounted for 30 percent of government revenues in 2005.[22] Reflecting its declining output, Syria became a net importer of oil in 2007, but in 2010 oil still accounted for 9.5 percent of GDP and 48 percent of exports.[23]

The development of Syria's tourist industry, long seen as a potentially important source of foreign exchange and employment, was hampered by chronic regional instability. During a good year, such as 2010, tourism accounted for 23 percent of export earnings and about 11–12 percent of GDP.[24]

A striking feature of the economy under Bashar al-Asad was the increasing role of service activities. Taken together, agriculture and industry (including

oil) accounted for 62 percent of GDP in 2000, while the share of services was 38 percent. By 2009 the respective figures were 54 percent and 46 percent.[25] In 2010 the service sectors together accounted for 57.7 percent of GDP.[26] Some 84.4 percent of GDP growth in the 2000–10 period derived from services, compared with only 15.6 percent from non-service sectors.[27]

In some respects, at first sight at least, Bashar's Syria was almost a model of fiscal prudence. At the outset, its external debts totalled $22.2 billion, owed mostly to former Soviet bloc countries, and they were restructured in 2005. By 2010 Syria's external debt stood at a modest $5.3 billion. The current account was in surplus for almost the entire period, resulting in a build-up of foreign reserves from a paltry $126 million, the year Bashar came to power to an impressive $19.6 billion in 2010.[28] Likewise the government's budget deficits were generally held within acceptable bounds. In eight of the eleven years in the 2000–10 period, the deficit was in the range of 1–3 percent of GDP, although it exceeded 4 percent in 2004 and 2005.[29] The only surplus was in 2001, and this was 2.3 percent of GDP. The government's record on inflation was more mixed, with sharp annual fluctuations (see Table 2). Overall, prices in 2010 were just short of 75 percent higher than in 2000. This partly reflected world price rises, but was also the result of the lifting of immensely costly state subsidies on agricultural products and fuel. In 2003–8 these subsidies cost between 5.9 percent and 12.9 percent of GDP annually, and lifting them formed a key part of Bashar's liberalisation programme.[30]

Table 2: Syria's average annual inflation (%)[31]

Year	*Average annual inflation*
2000	– 3.9
2001	3.4
2002	– 0.5
2003	5.8
2004	4.4
2005	7.2
2006	10.4
2007	4.7
2008	15.2
2009	2.8
2010	4.4

The international context

Compared with other Middle Eastern economies that carried a burden of Western debt, Syria enjoyed a degree of autonomy in its fiscal affairs, reflecting its relative isolation from the outside world. To a considerable degree, Syria was self-sufficient in energy and foodstuffs, and its oil exports (albeit gradually dwindling) provided a reliable basis for state finances. Largely, and despite the liberalisation of the Bashar al-Asad era, the economy was protected from external competition by tariffs and other trade barriers. This had the single benefit of largely insulating the country from the 2008 global financial crisis.

Nevertheless, Syria's economic fortunes were inordinately shaped by both the regional environment and, given agriculture's significance to the economy, its vulnerability to drought. Located at the core of the *mashraq*, and as a front-line state in the Arab world's confrontation with Israel, Syria's economy was highly sensitive to regional developments. After the 1973 Arab–Israeli war, Damascus enjoyed an influx of aid from Gulf states that, by the late 1970s, totalled approximately $1.6 billion annually—some 10 percent of GNP.[32] In the 1980s, however, this fell sharply as the Gulf economies suffered from a precipitous drop in oil prices resulting from a world oil glut. This downturn severely eroded remittances from Syrians working in the Gulf, which have been another mainstay of the economy. The resultant economic crisis was aggravated by protracted droughts which devastated Syria's largely rain-fed agriculture sector. With the pragmatism that was its hallmark, the regime of Hafez al-Asad responded with swingeing spending cuts and import restrictions (the impact of the latter eased somewhat by extensive smuggling, especially via Lebanon and mainly under the auspices of powerful regime security figures), and with an initial cautious round of economic liberalisation. In the early 1990s, following Syria's participation in the military coalition against Iraq during the 1990–91 Kuwait crisis, Gulf aid resumed and accounted for approximately 5 percent of GNP.[33] Although Gulf aid declined in the late 1990s, the economic boom in the Gulf resulting from renewed oil price buoyancy in the years 2000–8 gave another boost to Syria's economy. Remittances expanded, sales of Syrian goods in Gulf markets increased, and entrepreneurs from the Gulf began committing to a more investor-friendly Syria, albeit mainly in the real estate and tourism sectors.

The political and economic fortunes of Syria and Lebanon were inextricably linked. Damascus intervened militarily in its neighbour's civil war in 1976 and its forces remained there until 2005, following the murder of Lebanon's former Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri. Lebanon offered Syria's military and

security agencies immense opportunities to enrich themselves by illicit activities, and it was an important destination for Syrians unable to find work at home. The ejection of Syria's military from Lebanon—which occurred in large part as the result of pressure from the West in reaction to the Asad regime's alleged support for Sunni insurgents operating against the US in Iraq—was a significant economic blow and a political and military setback. Some observers have identified the withdrawal as a supplemental driver of Bashar al-Asad's liberalisation programme (see below).

Syria's alliance with Iran, which goes back to the 1980–8 Iran–Iraq war, became a strategic mainstay of the regime and this was echoed in closer economic relations. In particular, since 1982, Tehran supplied Damascus with subsidised oil in exchange for the closure of an Iraqi oil pipeline which ran through Syrian territory to the Mediterranean. Bilateral ties were nevertheless relatively modest, however, with trade totalling $316 million in 2010.[34] Iran's economic significance to the Syrian regime sharply increased following the uprising. Tehran provided billions of dollars, although the precise sum is not publicly known. In mid-2011 it was reported that Iran was considering financial aid of up to $5.8 billion.[35] A year later Tehran was apparently providing the Syrian regime with $600–700 million per month,[36] and in 2013 it agreed two credit lines for Syria, together worth $4.3 billion.[37]

Hafez al-Asad's Syria and Saddam Hussain's Iraq were bitter antagonists, but a rapprochement started with Bashar's accession to power. Relations in the post-Saddam era have become especially close since May 2006, when the Shi'a-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki, which was close to Syria's key regional ally, Iran, took office in Baghdad. In November 2006 diplomatic relations were restored after nearly 25 years and trade developments soon followed. In 2005 Syria's exports to Iraq, mainly comprising manufacturing goods, totalled $282 million and accounted for 4.3 percent of that year's total. The equivalent figures for 2010 were $2.3 billion and just over 20 percent.[38]

The catastrophic US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 had major repercussions for Syria. By 2006, as sectarian carnage raged in Iraq, Syria was hosting 1.3 million Iraqi refugees, placing great pressure on its already hard-pressed social infrastructure and fanning property and retail price inflation. Refugee spending, however, became an important pillar of the economy. In 2005–7 'refugees…boosted domestic demand and [were] thus perceived as the main driver for the Syrian economy'.[39]

Hafez al-Asad supported Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) militants fighting the Turkish government, putting severe strain on Syria's relations with Ankara.

In 1998, threatened with a Turkish invasion, Syria abandoned the PKK and expelled its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, from Damascus. Prior to the uprising, with the PKK issue resolved, Syria's relations with Turkey blossomed. Landmarks were: a visit to Ankara by Bashar al-Asad in January 2004, the first ever to Turkey by a Syrian president; a free trade accord that took effect in January 2007; and a second visit to Ankara by the Syrian leader in October 2007. Trade and tourism expanded and Turkish investment in Syria intensified, especially in Aleppo's industrial sector. Bilateral merchandise trade expanded from $729.2 million in 2000 to $2.3 billion in 2010, although the trade balance was heavily in Turkey's favour: of the 2010 figure $1.85 billion comprised Turkish exports to Syria.[40]

Relations with the US and the European Union (EU) also shaped the evolution of Syria's economy. Damascus has long been subjected to a variety of US sanctions which intensified during the presidency of George W. Bush. Although direct US economic involvement in Syria was limited, reflecting decades of antagonism, US sanctions routinely covered non-US entities and persons, who were thus faced with a choice of trading with Syria or the US.

Following the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s, Damascus consciously moved to develop closer relations with the EU. In 2001 the two sides began negotiating a formal association agreement, similar to accords between the EU and many other littoral Mediterranean states. These provide for preferential access to each other's markets, and commit the Mediterranean party to economic liberalisation. Syria's talks with Brussels proceeded at a snail's pace and were frozen in May 2011, after the start of the Syrian uprising. However, Syria benefited from a range of EU measures under the European Neighbourhood Programme that was essentially designed to encourage its economic liberalisation, but these were suspended also.

Very much in line with its liberalisation programme, in the decade before the uprising Syria sought to widen its access to regional markets. A free trade accord was signed with Turkey (see above) in January 2005, the Arab League-sponsored Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) came into effect; and in May 2010 Syria applied to join the World Trade Organisation.

Of all the variables impacting upon the Syrian economy, the climate is the only one over which the regime has no influence. The vital role of agriculture, both in terms of output and employment, means that the country's historical economic performance has fluctuated dramatically in response to rainfall. Syria's economic fortunes in the 1980s and in 2006–10, for example, were deeply affected by drought.

Reactive liberalisation

Economic 'liberalisation' was a hallmark of Bashar al-Asad's presidency prior to the uprising, but it was a process repeatedly attempted by his father. To varying degrees, the Ba'athist regimes that governed Syria since March 1963 were all committed to state control and deeply mistrustful of the private sector (or at least its non-*petit bourgois* manifestations). In the years prior to Hafez al-Asad's 'Corrective Movement' (i.e. his *coup d'état*) in November 1970, the country's traditional *bourgeoisie*—who dominated politics as well as the economy—were largely dispossessed and marginalised. In economic terms, the Ba'athist state was a resounding failure and the limited reforms implemented under Hafez al-Asad were ineffectual. State-run enterprises, shielded from imported competition by protective tariffs, ran up huge losses and produced goods of dubious quality for sale at state-fixed prices. The populace did not starve; it lived hand-to-mouth and was reliant for its wellbeing on a profusion of price subsidies. Exchange rates—and there were three, respectively used for different categories of transaction—were artificially fixed. The ramshackle creaking edifice of Syria's economy was overseen by a huge, underpaid and unmotivated bureaucracy, policed by a series of brutal security agencies operating outside any semblance of law, and these were dominated by the president's Alawi community. 'There was a certain equality of misery', a senior Western diplomat once opined.[41]

Under Hafez al-Asad, economic activity was no less heavily politicised than under his Ba'ath Party predecessors; but he was much more pragmatic, especially in times of economic hardship. In his initial economic liberalisation phase, in 1970–7, private enterprise was to an extent encouraged via the modest easing of state controls on a range of economic activities. At the same time, however, the public sector and state bureaucracy were expanded, thereby creating a large class that was directly dependent on the regime. A second broad liberalisation phase occurred in 1978–86. This derived from a recession that was largely caused by an economic downturn in the Gulf. Reforms included the launch of so-called mixed-sector (public–private) enterprises in tourism and transportation. In this period corrupt business networks expanded dramatically, focussing on the smuggling of a vast array of goods—from cigarettes to industrial machinery—across the borders with Turkey and Lebanon, where the Syrian Army had deployed in 1976. A third stage followed the nadir of the economic crisis. In 1986, Decree 10 was issued which permitted the establishment of joint public–private sector agricultural enterprises. In 1991, the president declared his adherence to 'economic pluralism'

whereby the private sector could play a much wider role alongside the public sector. A range of cautious and sometimes internally contradictory reforms to foreign currency, trade and tax regulations were implemented. The centrepiece was the much-vaunted Law 10 of 1991, which was intended to boost inward investment but failed to have any appreciable impact.

In his detailed study of Syria's public–private business networks Bassam Haddad observed:[42]

> The windfalls from each of these three periods increased the opportunity for rent-seeking and promoted a style of doing business marked by semi-legality, quick-profit mentalities, and short-term horizons. Each new opportunity drew more businessmen or new entrants into the respective business, swelling the size of informal economic networks. A new economic elite, not accustomed to competition and not vested in value-added generation, began to consolidate as a distinct, though not cohesive, upper portion of the 'private' sector in the early 1990s, spawning its own institutional context and development outcomes. Along with various government officials, the elite political and military/intelligence cores, and their offspring, this essentially rent-seeking economic elite had a well-defined interest in defending existing political-economic arrangements.

Former Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah al-Dardari agrees that Hafez al-Asad was keen to establish greater private sector involvement: 'Hafez tried economic liberalisation, and spoke of economic pluralism. He tried to align with the old business classes in the main urban centres of Damascus and Aleppo.'[43] The Muslim Brotherhood-led revolt of the late 1970s and early 1980s derailed his plans. They were revived only after 1990–1, when the financial outlook was transformed by the Kuwait crisis and the renewed influx of Gulf funds. Law 10 and other measures were implemented in this 'first phase of reform'.[44]

Dardari, who left government in late March 2011 when the cabinet of Prime Minister Naji al-Otri was dismissed following the first stirrings of the uprising, stated that a second phase 'was supposed to have taken place from 1995'.[45] In January 1994, however, the president's eldest son and chosen successor Bassel died in a car accident, and Hafez al-Asad, who was a diabetic with a history of heart problems, was unwell. 'The president was weak and fragile, and was not ready to push for further reforms', explained Dardari, adding that Hafez basically resolved to postpone further change until Bashar took the helm.

In short, liberalisation—in the limited sense of a wider role for the private sector within an economy still dominated by the state, and with private businessmen often acting in alliance with and under the control of regime insiders—was implemented both as a means of consolidating the regime and in

response to economic crises that the public sector had failed to manage. Distrust of private business permeated the 'system', but those at the heart of the regime at least understood that Syria's only hope of alleviating its economic difficulties was through the private sector. The die had been cast well before Bashar al-Asad assumed power in July 2000.

Five-year hiatus

There is no doubt that Bashar al-Asad was personally committed to economic reform—albeit of a cautious, gradual nature—but progress was painfully slow and often incoherent, reflecting the multiple pressures he faced. Key sociopolitical sectors bitterly opposed change: public sector enterprises understood that they could not survive in a market-orientated economy. The corrupt networks linking regime insiders and their crony capitalist partners had a manifest interest in maintaining the *status quo*. During Hafez al-Asad's rule, the Ba'ath Party was largely transformed into a machine to adulate the president, yet it remained fundamentally suspicious of the private sector.

Beyond the matter of reform *per se*, Bashar was engaged in the more pressing task of securing his position *vis-à-vis* a troublesome regime 'old guard', by no means all of whom were long-serving or, indeed, ageing. While recognising his utility as a figurehead, they appeared to lack respect for the mild-mannered, Western-educated newcomer. Dardari identifies two key reasons for hesitant reform in the first five years of Bashar al-Asad's presidency: 'He wanted change; but there was no clear, comprehensive programme of reform. There was no clear vision of where Syria was going. Also, he had to consolidate his position in respect of the "old guard" in the military, in security agencies and in the party. It required a lot of his energy.'[46] The new president could not dominate the regime in the same way as his father had done; in his early years in power he replaced numerous senior figures of dubious loyalty in key security, military and civilian agencies.

It may have been slow, but there was progress. In April 2001 Law 28 was passed, which provided for the establishment of private banks, ending a forty-year state monopoly on banking, with the first of these opening in 2004. Law 36, also of 2001, permitted the creation of private universities, and fifteen were established. Plans were announced for the establishment of a stock market. In 2002 the exchange rates for the Syrian pound were unified and the following year saw the ban on foreign currency trading lifted. Underlining Bashar's forthcoming liberalisation agenda, on 13 May 2000—just a

month before Hafez al-Asad's death—a decree was issued amending Law 10 of 1991, which had been intended to stimulate foreign investment but had been largely ineffectual.

Rampant corruption

Bashar's rhetoric suggested that the economy could be invigorated by means of healthy competition, but the reality was vastly different. Informal state–private business networks, which first emerged relatively covertly in the 1970s and had subsequently grown in wealth, influence and visibility, now became rampant, cornering major areas of economic activity by dint solely of their connections with the president's family or links to core elements of the military–security complex on which the regime was founded. Bashar understood that these networks were a double-edged sword. They fostered their patrons' loyalty to the regime, but at the same time they undermined public confidence in its ability to manage the economy. Even had he wanted to curb corruption—and there is no hard evidence that his concerns went beyond grumbling in private—Bashar was too weak to act. Official crackdowns on corruption occurred, but key figures were left untouched due to their importance to the regime.[47]

Such rank corruption encouraged the spread of lesser corruption throughout the administration and the economy. Again, this was an increasingly salient feature under Hafez al-Asad, but it expanded exponentially after his death. By 2005, when a more coherent liberalisation programme was being pursued, the corrupt networks were entrenched to the extent that they were not only seizing opportunities that arose fortuitously but were actually shaping the reform agenda itself by pressing for measures that would guarantee their monopolies, and these embraced most major business sectors.

The January 2006 US Embassy cable entitled 'Syria's corrupt classes'[48] affirmed that 'Syria continues to be dominated by a "corrupt class" who use their personal ties to members of the Asad family and the security services to gain monopolistic control over most sectors of the economy, while enriching themselves and their regime beneficiaries.' The insightful cable continued:

> Contacts state that the corruption which starts at the top filters down through all levels of business. Contacts among Damascus' Sunni business elite, many of whom have an axe to grind with the regime because of their class's continued diminished role, complain that a predominantly Allawite [*sic*] 'corrupt class' has become entrenched over the past 30 years and is using the corrupt system to dominate all levels of business. While contacts often are unwilling to talk openly about individuals in this group and their specific activities, they contend that the members of the

> corrupt classes are well-known and that any Syrian could develop a list of the 50 most corrupt. They state that the corrupt classes have varying levels of influence and power in the government, and that the most powerful are in President Asad's inner circle. They further state that all levels of the corrupt classes are connected to Syrian security and military intelligence, which they use to gain monopolistic and extra-legal control of domestic markets.

The cable concluded:

> The corrupt classes have a symbiotic relationship with the Asad regime—both profit from their relationship and neither could function without the other. As contacts among Syria's Sunni community are quick to point out, the corrupt classes are preventing more progressive elements, including many businessmen who have received their college and post-graduate training in the US and Europe, from fully participating in the economy. The Asads run Syria as a family business, and the corrupt classes are the ones that make the business function…however, identifying where the family ends and the corrupt classes begin can be difficult.

Many—perhaps most—of the stars of this firmament were Alawis, and the undisputed brightest was an Asad family member; but Sunnis and others were also prominent. Corruption, at least, was an area where the regime's non-sectarian pretensions often coincided with the reality.

The 'social market economy'

The reform process, such as it was, massively accelerated after June 2005, when the Ba'ath Party's tenth regional congress endorsed the notion of a 'social market economy' in which the private sector would flourish and social welfare would be protected. The same month, Dardari was appointed Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs with a remit to formulate a coherent integrated liberalisation programme. He confirmed that his central preoccupation was a looming balance of payments crisis caused by stagnating oil exports and rising imports. Dardari, who was very much a non-Ba'athist figure, was first summoned for talks with the president in mid-2003. He contends that Asad did not have a sophisticated understanding of the reforms that were necessary, and that his own predecessors had failed to provide the president with 'a clear trajectory.' He suggests that 'Asad had an instinctive feeling that things had to change. But he told me bluntly that he did not know how it should be done, or in which direction.'[49] Once again, reform was reactive.

The programme was elaborated in the Tenth Five Year Plan (2005–10) for the economy, which saw the introduction of a series of liberalising measures.[50] In 2005 the Syrian Stocks and Financial Markets Authority was established

and the stock market opened in March 2009. New investment legislation left cotton ginning, water bottling and cigarette production as the only activities reserved for the public sector. A Syrian Investment Agency was established. Private companies were contracted to manage state-owned ports. Private investment in power plants was permitted, paving the way for the establishment of the country's first independent power station, and taxes and costly fuel and food subsidies were cut. Foreign currency and product price controls were further relaxed and protective tariffs on imports lowered; free trade was inaugurated with GAFTA fellow members in 2005 and Turkey in 2007. Free trade zones near the country's ports and borders, originally established in 1971–2, were expanded, and in October 2010 the 'Syria for Investment' holding company was established which functioned alongside two powerful and diversified private holding companies formed in 2007, Cham Holding and Syria Holding. In all, over one thousand new laws and decrees were promulgated to promote competition and investment.[51] This momentum was expected to be maintained in an Eleventh Five Year Plan (2011–15), which was approved by the government in November 2010.

Although intensive and generally coherent—at least compared with what went before—the reforms were limited and sometimes inchoate. The bloated and inefficient public sector was largely untouched and corruption continued unabated. 'The economy remains largely centrally planned, and uncompetitive public sector companies continue to drain government finances', observed the US State Department in March 2011, adding that while 'government officials publicly reject the notion of privatizing state enterprises on ideological grounds, such positions likely reflect their unstated pragmatic fears of a dramatic increase in unemployment'.[52]

These new measures often conflicted with old rules and regulations—themselves sometimes mutually contradictory. A US Embassy cable in March 2007 noted:[53]

> The regime ensures that all levels of the Syrian business community are co-opted by systematic corruption, just as it ensures, with a welter of Emergency Law provisions and ordinary laws and regulations, that most Syrians constantly find themselves violating various legal provisions as they go about their lives. With this sword of Damocles hanging over their heads, it is that much easier for the SARG [Syrian Arab Republic Government] to manipulate them.

Behind the scenes, and sometimes publicly, old battles raged between the advocates and opponents of reform, the authorities and corrupt state–private business networks (to the extent that the two were distinguishable), and rival

entrenched state–private business networks. Even when measures were approved by a president who appeared to be committed to reform, their implementation was often sabotaged and Asad was unable to neutralise opponents of his liberalisation plans.

In November 2006 a US Embassy official asked: 'If sceptics of the regime's reform efforts are correct and the pace and scope of economic reform is too slow and too haphazard to make a significant economic difference anytime soon, the question is, why?' He concluded that:

> Syria is full of opponents of reform…the large majority of Syrians feel they have a stake in the current system. In addition to members of the Ba'ath Party and the security services, who arguably would be the biggest losers under any structural adjustment, the 30 percent of Syrians who work for the SARG also jealously guard their positions, with many of them focused on continued access to low-level graft.[54]

This chimes with Dardari's argument that certain businessmen would press for a sector to be opened up for private investment, and after they had been granted a licence they would press for the sector to be closed to competition:

> I refused to close the door…they would then use their influence with the bureaucracy to hinder the issue of licences to competitors…. Verbal opposition came from the Ba'ath Party and groups such as the popular organisations—the Peasants' Organisation and so on. The ultimate sabotage came from the 'money–power alliance'.[55]

He confirms the limited role that market forces played in the allocation of contracts: 'When I wanted to have a new public procurement law, I sent a memo to the president showing that 50 percent of all government construction contracts in the five years prior to 2008 had gone to just five companies.'[56]

In September 2007 a US official noted that Dardari reaffirmed the need to lift fuel subsidies because 'the wealthiest 10 percent of the population was monopolising some 56 percent of subsidies due to the pervasive corruption', adding that the 'smuggling' of subsidised products across Syria's borders was 'rampant'.[57] The challenges he faced were no secret: 'Damascus's chattering classes…talked about Dardari's own profound frustration over his inability to implement his reform agenda.'[58]

For Dardari—who was appointed to a senior position in the UN's Economic and Social Council for Western Asia (ESCWA) in September 2011—Asad's failure to deliver fully on his reform agenda was primarily due to his need to appease the powerful constituencies backing his regime. US officials reached a less sympathetic conclusion:

> There is no doubt that Assad's motives in supporting Dardari and economic reform are complicated and likely represent an unwholesome blend of political cynicism,

> idealism, crony opportunism, naive faith in haphazard steps of economic liberalization, and fears about taking any economic decisions that might provoke widespread economic distress and protests. Assad faces the same legacy issues and economic challenges that face leaders across the Arab world: How to deal with globalization and the danger of losing out in the world economy while trying to build on the legacy their fathers established in simpler times. Assad certainly realizes the enormity of Syria's economic mess and may sincerely want to reform economically. However there are less positive explanations. Assad may well simply seek to expand corrupt family and crony activities. Cultivating a reputation for economic reform helps provide legitimacy to a regime that lacks any compelling claim to rule in Syria other than force.

At the macro level, the achievements of the post-2005 reform programme were eminently respectable, but there were scant indications of fundamental structural change. In 2010 the private sector accounted for 59 percent of gross fixed capital formation, compared with 36 percent in 2000;[59] but these proportions were comparable with those of the 1990s. In 2007 the private sector accounted for 60.5 percent of GDP, compared with 52.3 percent in 2000.[60] According to the World Bank, however, the private sector contributed an estimated 51 percent of GDP in the 1992–7 period, compared with 40 percent in 1980, and this had risen to 61 percent by 2002.[61] In 2008 estimates suggested that the private sector employed 65 percent of Syria's workforce, compared with approximately 60 percent at the start of Bashar's presidency.[62] However, the World Bank reported that the proportion was as high as 72 percent in the 1992–7 period.[63]

Attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) was a central objective of the regime's liberalisation programme, and it succeeded in this respect. In 2007–10 Syria attracted $6.8 billion in net FDI, with an annual peak of $2.6 billion in 2009. This compares with a mere $761 million in the 1991–9 period and $1.9 billion in 2000–6.[64]

The private sector was of growing significance in the formal employment market, although many new jobs were less well paid and less secure than those in the public sector. In 2001–10 the public sector's share of formal employment remained relatively stable, at about 27 percent, while the private sector's share increased from 34 percent to 43 percent.[65] Perversely, the regime's efforts to appease public sector workers placed their private sector counterparts at a relative disadvantage. Nader Kabbani has observed:[66]

> A key element in transitioning from a state-led to a social market economy is increasing the attractiveness of private sector jobs relative to government jobs, especially in terms of wages and benefits. Yet, despite a stated interest in public

> employment retrenchment policies, the Syrian government has increased public sector wages substantially since 2000. Between 2001 and 2007, the average nominal hourly wage of a public sector worker between 20 and 29 years of age increased by 70 percent, whereas the average hourly wage of a private sector worker increased by only 50 percent.

The evidence is unclear, but by 2010 the influence of the corrupt crony capitalist networks appeared to be receding, as market forces gained traction and a genuinely autonomous business community started to assert itself. Haddad refers to 'the decline of privileged networks as the dominant route to economic "success" after 2005',[67] and from the middle of that year the emergence of 'more genuinely representative business institutions [than regime- and network-dominated Chambers of Commerce]...signalled a break in the economic governance structure in Syria.'[68]

Critics of Syria's liberal economic reform programme focused on its failure to generate sufficient employment opportunities and the negative impact this had on outlying rural areas and wealth distribution. Dardari insists that the project was not a straightforward, Washington consensus-style neo-liberalism: 'I believed that we needed to develop in a more socially balanced way, and it was not difficult to convince Bashar al-Asad of this. We wanted capitalism with a human face.'[69] Some analysts question whether this actually happened. Raymond Hinnebusch argues that: 'The drive to evade isolation and access resources meant that the ideal of a social market economy was sidelined, and the policy pursued by Bashar's reforming technocrats...was hardly distinguishable from neo-liberalism, with its priority on capital accumulation and growth to the neglect of equality and distribution.'[70]

Aside from the corrupt 'economic oligarchs',[71] the main beneficiaries of the reforms were the educated urban upper middle class, especially in Damascus and Aleppo. The less affluent and the poor—the vast majority of Syrians—were hard hit by inflation and the lifting of subsidies. In 2008 nearly 70 percent of the workforce earned under $100 per month, and some 40 percent of public sector employees supplemented their incomes through second jobs. In 2010 an average public sector monthly salary was in the range $225–270.[72] A UNDP survey revealed that, in 2003–4, 11.4 percent of Syrians—almost 2 million people—were unable to obtain their essential needs. Moreover, 30 percent of the population—some 5.3 million people—lived below an 'upper poverty line' representing 'a reasonable level of basic needs' and 62 percent of them lived in rural areas, including the north-eastern governorates hard hit by drought in 2006–7. At the national level, although poverty decreased in the 1996–2004

period (albeit with significant regional variations), inequality increased, with the Gini index (where 0 represents perfect equality and 100 signifies complete inequality) rising from 33 to 37. The UNDP observed: 'At the national level, growth was not pro-poor. Non-poor individuals…benefitted proportionally more than the poor from economic growth.'[73] A 2007 study showed that 12.3 percent (some 2.4 million people) were below the lower poverty line and 33.6 percent (around 6.7 million people) below the higher limit.[74] Bearing in mind the drought, the lifting of subsidies and inflation, it is almost certain that the position had worsened further by 2010. The same picture emerges from analyses based on household income and expenditure surveys.[75]

Syria's growing and youthful population meant that just to maintain previous unemployment levels (assuming that labour force participation rates remained stable; see below), some 250–300,000 net new jobs had to be created each year. The actual performance fell way below this level. In 2001–7 there was an average annual net gain of only 36,000 jobs, and in 2008 a net loss of 98,000 jobs.[76] The formal unemployment rate in 2003–10 fluctuated between 8.1 percent and 10.9 per cent,[77] but these figures are subject to interpretation. A feature of this period was a decreasing labour force participation rate (the labour force as a proportion of the total population), from 52 percent in 2001 to 43 percent in 2010.[78] The decline was especially marked in rural areas. Had it not been for this, the unemployment rate would have been over 25 percent. Unemployment was especially high amongst Syria's youth. In 2007 the youth unemployment rate was 19 percent, and young people accounted for 57 percent of the unemployed and 78 percent of first-time job-seekers.[79] In 2010 nearly a quarter of a million young Syrians (aged 15–24) were unemployed, up from 192,000 in 2009.[80] For those aged 15–19 the rate rose from 14.8 percent in 2009 to 19.7 percent in 2010. The equivalent rates for the 20–24 age group were 17.7 percent and 20.8 per cent respectively.[81]

Dardari is upbeat about the progress that Syria had achieved: 'By January 2011 I was satisfied that the macro-economic fundamentals were very very strong. It was only step one and we had a long road ahead of us. I have never claimed ultimate success, but I have to say that the benchmarks we established in 2004 for 2010 were mostly met.'[82]

Conclusion

It is not difficult to criticise Bashar al-Asad's economic reform programme. Its shortfalls were manifest; its achievements open to question, although many

macro-economic indicators were encouraging. At the same time, Syria's elite, who were generally linked to the regime, benefited disproportionately from the reforms, while the majority of Syrians became poorer in real terms and unemployment persisted. The theory was that wealth would eventually trickle down to that majority of Syrians, and in the meantime the state would maintain a social safety net to protect the most disadvantaged. By 2010 there was no sign of this 'trickle-down' effect and the health, education and other public services forming Syria's economic 'safety net' were expanded but at the expense of quality. A Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR) study observed:[83]

> On the one hand, average annual GDP growth rate was relatively high…and the macroeconomic fundamentals were sound…On the other hand, economic growth did not reach the majority of the population.… The business environment was crippled with corruption and monopolies were championed by new interest groups which emerged in the early 1990s after the introduction of neo-liberal economic reforms.

The financial inequities aggravated by the reform programme were not the principal cause of the uprising, but they were almost certainly a significant contributory factor. Amongst the slogans chanted by anti-regime protesters was '*hamiha haramiha*!' ('Its [Syria's] protector [i.e. Bashar] is its thief!') Close relatives of the president notorious for their wealth were derided by name as 'thieves'.[84]

Asad's post-2005 economic reforms were certainly more than cosmetic. The crucial oil revenues that had been propping up much of the rest of the economy were about to disappear and the state had nothing with which to replace them. Limited in its room for political manoeuvre and hampered by the economic consequences of devastating droughts, the regime's response was to do what it could. Had the uprising not occurred, the reform process would surely have been widened and deepened, potentially allowing for a genuine 'trickle-down' of wealth. It would likely have enhanced Syria's existing income inequalities, however, and sharpened social and political tensions. Instead, the economy has been devastated by civil war and in 2014 it was estimated that even if the fighting stopped and GDP grew at an annual average rate of 5 per cent, it would take nearly thirty years for Syria to regain its 2010 GDP.[85]

9

THE ALAWIS OF TRIPOLI

IDENTITY, VIOLENCE AND URBAN GEOPOLITICS

Craig Larkin and Olivia Midha

> The Alawis are a Lebanese sect par excellence, which have not once scrimped on sending their sons to die as martyrs for the nation.... So why do some people try to put them in a place they don't belong? Why do people doubt our Lebaneseness?
>
> Fatima al-Rafaf, Lebanese University Tripoli[1]

> God have mercy on the youth of Jabal Mohsen and God protect Syria.
>
> Alawi martyr poster in Tripoli's Jabal Mohsen district.

This chapter explores the embattled existence and contested identities of Lebanon's Alawi community in Tripoli. A secretive and resilient Muslim sect, numbering less than ten percent of the city's half million populace, they remain firmly entrenched in a hilltop enclave of Jabal Mohsen, perched above their historic Sunni rival, the Bab al-Tabbaneh neighbourhood in the valley below. Economically marginalised and religiously mistrusted, the social and urban fractures of Jabal Mohsen have long been exacerbated through reliance on and continuing support for Syria's Alawi-led Asad dynasty. Political and

military complicity with Syrian forces and intelligence services during the Lebanese civil war (1975–90), and the more recent backing of Bashar al-Asad in Syria's ongoing civil war continues to fuel historic grievances and contemporary hostilities in Tripoli's troubled streets.

Tripoli has a long tradition for being a 'rebel' city, a fulcrum for successive armed resistance and liberation movements:[2] from anti-statist revolts led by Mufti Abdul Hamid Karami during the French Mandate (1920s), to secular pan-Arab currents in the 1960s and 70s, Haraket al-Tawhid's[3] attempts to enforce an 'Islamic city-state' in 1983–5 and the current emergence of salafi–jihadist groups stirring civil insurrection.[4] In the midst of uprisings and rebellions, Tripoli has also born witness to four decades of periodic urban violence, pitting Sunni militia gangs against Alawi fighters from the rival neighbourhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen.

The recent renewal of these hostilities in May 2008 has resulted in over twenty rounds of fighting leading to 170 deaths, hundreds of injuries, arson attacks against commercial properties and sectarian punishment beatings.[5] In August 2013 violence peaked, with twin car bombs striking Tripoli's al-Taqwa and al-Salam mosques during Friday prayers. These were the largest and deadliest bombs in the city since the end of the Lebanese civil war.[6] The attacks, which unsuccessfully targeted high-profile Sunni leaders, salafist Sheikh Salem al-Rafei and Justice Minister and former chief of Police Ashraf Rifi, implicated a number of Alawi suspects from Jabal Mohsen, including the head of the Arab Democratic Party (ADP) and former MP Ali Eid.[7] Retaliatory violence against Tripoli's Alawi community ensued. Punishment shootings at improvised checkpoints were orchestrated by salafist networks led by Sheikh al-Rafei's 'Military Committee to Avenge the Victims for the Tripoli Bombings' and by relatives of the victims, calling themselves 'protectors of blood' (*Awlia al-Dam*).[8]

Tripoli's descent into open warfare was only averted by a military security plan: the fifth such plan in the last decade. Implemented in April 2014, the plan deployed 1,400 Internal Security Forces (ISF), alongside Lebanese Army troops and military intelligence branches, and resulted in the confiscation of weapons and the immediate arrest or fortuitous disappearance of prominent militia leaders in both districts.[9] While an uneasy truce remains in place, this has been punctuated by sporadic armed attacks on Lebanese security services within Tripoli's eastern suburbs. Communal tensions and socio-economic frustrations simmer, with over 63 percent of residents living below the poverty line.[10] Incessant street violence and the threat of future clashes continue to distort daily lives and everyday urban encounters. Curfews, sniper points,

informal barricades, anti-sniper street curtains, tank-flanked roads and flying checkpoints intensify spatial battle lines and transform local inhabitants into urban combatants or 'civilian soldiers'.[11] The only hospital in Jabal Mohsen, al-Zahraa, now stands converted into a Lebanese Army base; an emblem of the pervasive militarisation of the physical landscape.

This territorial conflict within Tripoli's eastern suburbs mirrors and is fuelled by a number of broader Lebanese struggles: the battle for national sovereignty and internal security; the role and influence of Tripoli's political elites; and the escalation of geo-political rivalries: the Syria–Iran–Hizballah axis and the Saudi–Qatar–Sunni 'Future party' alignment. News outlets and international media have been quick to see the re-emergence of fighting in Tripoli as the inevitable spill-over and 'natural expansion' of the war raging in Syria.[12] In the words of Emile Hokayem, Tripoli has once more become 'Lebanon's little Syria', the 'fertile ground for the long-awaited proxy war between enemies and allies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime'.[13] This regional explanation is perhaps all the more convincing given the influx of over a million Syrian refugees to Lebanon, including rebel fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and salafi–jihadist networks.[14] Indeed, Tripoli is now host to over 62,000 registered Syrian refugees (closer to 300,000 in North Lebanon) placing immense strain on public services, employment opportunities, housing and community relations.[15]

The focus on Tripoli's toxic cocktail of Syria's civil war, salafism and sectarianism, which continues to dominate and subsume the limited scholarship on Jabal Mohsen/Bab al-Tabbaneh,[16] too often masks the complex history of Alawi integration and downplays Lebanese complicity in the conflict. This chapter argues that Jabal Mohsen is not merely a 'proxy battlefield' or an extension of the Syrian conflict, but its own historic 'theatre of war' imbued with local grievances, political power rivalries and internal tensions. Decades of violence and hundreds of deaths point as much to the failure of the Lebanese state as they do to the penetration of regional actors and competing antagonistic ideologies (Arabism/Islamism). Based on interviews and ethnographic observations within Jabal Mohsen, this chapter seeks to examine the ongoing and dynamic negotiation of identity, social memory and everyday survival. It argues that an accurate overview of the Alawi experience in Tripoli must analyse Jabal Mohsen as both a physical site of urban conflict and an imagined space of communal solidarities (national, religious and political) and geo-political rivalries. Indeed, Jabal Mohsen has become a metonym for Lebanon's Alawi community: the matrix within which the battle over Alawi

identity and allegiance is waged. Consequently, control within, or more accurately over, the territory has come to symbolise control within, or more accurately over, the community itself. More broadly this chapter argues that the future stability of Tripoli's warring neighbourhoods is highly dependent on tighter coordination and centralisation of Lebanon's overlapping intelligence services, alongside a greater political commitment to economic investment in its impoverished ghettoes. Without such a convergence, the socio-economic inequalities that currently blight Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh will continue to be exploited and manipulated by 'alleyway commanders',[17] rival intelligence branches, radical sheikhs and political elites, all keen to consolidate personal fiefdoms and strategic alliances.

The mountain (Jabal) defended by blood

> The Alawis didn't come to Tripoli, the Alawis have always been here; before the Maronites, before the Druze. When the Maronites came, they took the sites [occupied by the Alawis] as did the Druze.... So the Alawis who would live in these mountain areas had to defend their land with their blood.
>
> Badr Wannous, Tripoli MP, 18 December 2013

The indigenous claims of Lebanese religious sects are often grounded in a continuous mountain homeland: the Jabal 'Amil of the Shi'a, the Jabal al-Druz (and Shouf) of the Druze and Jabal Lubnan (Keserwan and Metn) of the Maronites.[18] The Alawis are no exception, with over half of their estimated 100,000–120,000 community ensconced in the tightly-knit mountain suburb of Jabal Mohsen, east of Tripoli's Abu Ali river. Historically, due to their unorthodox Islamic beliefs,[19] successive waves of religious persecution led to Alawi displacement from urban centres to mountain outlays in Jabal Ansariyeh in Syria and the mountains of Tripoli, Akkar and al-Diniyya along the northwestern Lebanese coastline. Today fifteen Lebanese Alawi villages stretch from the northern Akkar to Ghajar[20] on the southern border with Israel, but Jabal Mohsen remains the most significant locus of communal power.

Jabal Mohsen has not always been an exclusive Alawi district. In the early-twentieth-century Lebanese society was arguably more stratified by class and feudalism than by religious affiliation,[21] and for decades Jabal Mohsen was home to both Alawi and Sunni rural migrants who cohabited and even intermarried.[22] Even in contemporary Tripoli, Jabal Mohsen has no separate civil registry and is included administratively as part of the wider quarter of Bab al-Tabbaneh. Officially, the Alawi presence in Lebanon as a distinct religious community was

recorded in the first and only public census of 1932, which noted that they accounted for less than 1 percent of the 861,339 populace. Alawis were granted formal recognition by the Franco-Lebanese treaty of 1936, 'Arrêté no. 60/L.R', as a 'religious sect' (*al-ta'ifa al-diniyya*) with the right to sovereignty over personal status law and sectarian political representation.[23] In reality, however, their diminutive numbers precluded their political participation and the establishment of separate Alawi religious courts or civil associations.

Demographic uncertainty and political sensitivity make it problematic to confirm current numbers of Lebanese Alawis. There have been political attempts to bolster community numbers, such as the Syrian-endorsed '1994 Presidential Naturalization decree' (No. 5247) which granted Lebanese nationality to around 8,000 Alawis in Akkar and Tripoli.[24] On the other hand, there is also strong evidence to suggest that large numbers of Alawis have changed their religious identity to Sunni or Shi'a to gain better access to public sector jobs and to facilitate social integration.[25] Some commentators equate this with the historic practice of *taqiyya*, religious dissimulation in the face of persecution; other political sources cite civil unrest or even financial incentives: 'Shi'a leaders would give Alawis money to change their official denomination in order to swell their numbers.'[26] From 2009 to 2013, Alawi voter registration in Tripoli fell significantly by 0.76 percent (15,224 to 14,565); a natural consequence of both internal violence and the pragmatic upshot of religious conversion evidenced by identity card alterations.[27]

Yet within Jabal Mohsen, along the hostile confrontation line (*khatt al-tamas*), few Alawi residents, it appears, have permanently left their homes for surrounding villages. In fact, a number of local surveys suggest a consolidation of Alawi numbers with more than half the current residents having moved to the suburb within the last twenty years.[28] There also appears to be an overwhelming commitment to remain (*sumud*)[29] and repair battle-ravaged homes: 90 percent of inhabitants with properties damaged by the conflict choose to repair them rather than moving elsewhere;[30] residents also exhibit a surprisingly high perception of security within Jabal Mohsen—with 89 percent feeling safer within the neighbourhood than outside it.[31] Arguably, these trends speak more to the endemic poverty and lack of viable economic alternatives than affirming Alawi territorial proclivities. As one middle-aged shopkeeper in Jabal Mohsen confesses, 'We live here not out of choice but necessity. Few can afford to leave or even afford rent these days. There will never be peace in this place—so we are forced to defend our homes and our dignity (*karamna*).'[32]

Consolidating power: patronage, politics and violence

Despite such demographic uncertainty, Alawi communal representation in Lebanon and within Tripoli has almost exclusively resided with one single power broker, the Arab Democratic Party (ADP). The ADP owes its origins to a convergence of social leftist movements—the Alawi Youth Movement (*harakat al-shabab al-Alawiyya*)—during the 1960s and direct military and political sponsorship by the Syrian state since their Lebanese intervention in 1976. Headed by a charismatic Tripoli schoolteacher, Ali Eid, the movement initially fused the struggle for Alawi civil rights with a desire for greater communal security. Eid, in the words of a senior ADP acoletye, channelled 'the spirit of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X',[33] yet it was his stabbing by a Saudi national during his studies at the American University of Beirut which helped to shape his public persona, as a symbol of Alawi communal defiance. The ADP's radical transformation from civic activism to armed mobilisation paralleled Lebanon's rapid decent into a destructive civil war. In 1976, violence in Tripoli led to Alawi displacement from Jabal Mohsen due to local clashes with the Fatah movement and Islamist currents. The 'trauma of expulsion' from the Jabal, according to ADP sources, fostered deep resentments, existential fears and a desire for armed retribution.

In exile, Ali Eid consolidated his alliance with Syrian President Hafez al-Asad and his brother Rifaat al-Asad, head of internal security forces and the infamous paramilitary group the Defence Companies (*al-Saraya al-Difa'*). Rifaat al-Asad provided military training and weapons for his Lebanese co-religionists, facilitating their return to Jabal Mohsen and the creation of an ADP militia, the Arab Red Knights[34] (*Al-Fursan al-Hammur al-Arabi*). In return, the ADP under Eid's leadership offered unwavering loyalty and an operational stronghold for Syrian military and intelligence services within Jabal Mohsen. As ADP spokesman Ali Fedda elucidates, 'Syria trained us, drilled us, brought us weapons, supported us and brought us back to defend our area. We came back with the Syrian Army to Lebanon.'[35]

The ADP's dynamic evolution within Tripoli and amongst Jabal Mohsen's Alawi community invariably shaped and continues to shape the Lebanese Alawi experience. It is best characterised in four distinct phases. The first phase (1976–93) witnessed the ADP's creation and consolidation of local Alawi leadership through Syrian support for its militia—the Arab Red Knights—and later, through the post-war spoils of a Syrian dominated peace agreement.[36] The Syrian-endorsed Ta'if Accord of 1989 uniquely granted Lebanese Alawis two parliamentary seats (Tripoli and Akkar), two repre-

sentatives to head governmental institutions, one diplomatic ambassador and an independent Alawi court system to regulate communal civil laws.[37] An Islamic Alawi Council was later established, comprising 600 members and presided over by Sheikh Asad Assi. Ali Eid was elected in 1992, as the first Alawi deputy in Tripoli, while Ba'athist Abdul-Rahman took the other Alawi seat in the Akkar.

The second phase (1993–2000) can be characterised as a Syrian retreat from the ADP and the rise of alternative Alawi politicians. In Lebanon's 1996 elections, which were widely manipulated by Syria through ballot-rigging, gerrymandering and coercion,[38] Ali Eid emphatically lost his parliamentary seat, to wealthy Tripoli businessman Ahmad Hbous. The Syrian estrangement from its erstwhile Alawi proxy can be attributed to both Asad's disquiet over Ali Eid's aggressive reputation in Tripoli and suspicions concerning his close personal relationship to Rifaat al-Asad. Rifaat's abortive Syrian military *coup* in 1984, which Patrick Seale terms 'The Brothers' War',[39] led to a period of enforced exile in Europe, while his later attempts to manoeuvre for a possible succession bid at the end of the 1990s resulted in armed clashes in Latakia and a brutal crackdown on his support network.[40] Both factors certainly contributed to a shift in Syrian policy, yet the ADP's political marginalisation in Tripoli also reflects the harsh realities of Pax Syrianna. As Raymond Hinnebusch explains, in Lebanon, Syria 'was able to play one force against another and make itself indispensable as a decisive source of support in these power struggles and the only stable source of protection from opponents'.[41] The divide and rule strategy in Tripoli enabled Asad to curb Eid's power while at the same time fostering a range of allies amongst Sunni traditional elites (Karami), clans (Aswad, Mori, Nashar) and eventually even amongst his former Islamist enemies (Hisham Minkara and Bilal Shaaban, Islamic Unification Movement–Military Council).

The loss of Eid's parliamentary seat did not fully erode his standing or popularity among his support base within Jabal Mohsen. Rather, it was emblematic of the growing division between an Alawi political elite—selected due to district composition by Tripoli's Sunni majority, but increasingly seen as 'disconnected and unaccountable at the grassroots level'[42]—and an Alawi communal leadership based on patronage networks embedded within Jabal Mohsen. ADP spokesman Ali Fedda, explains the distorted consequences of this rupture:

> We have two deputies in Parliament—according to the electoral law which is unjust and retrograde—these two deputies are ours [Alawis] but the Sunni Future movement has taken them. So we have deputies who don't represent us. In the elections,

> the candidate for Jabal Mohsen was Rifaat al-Eid, he took 98 percent of the votes cast by Alawis; Badr Wannous got 2 percent [of the Alawi vote] and he is told he is the deputy.
>
> Elections here are based on a majority system—so the majority of the voters in Tripoli are Sunni. It is Sunnis who choose our deputy, not us. Badr Wannous cannot support the interests of the Alawis because he is from the completely opposing [political] current…He was never the choice of the people, he was forced onto the Alawi seat.[43]

The ADP's exclusion from the Lebanese political arena, however, has resulted in a number of strategic gains for the party. It has enabled them to legitimate their 'disenfranchised' narrative and to champion themselves as 'the real voice of the [Alawi] people',[44] while at the same time distancing and disavowing their party from state failures within Jabal Mohsen. As the Lebanese authorities—both municipal and military—retreated from Tripoli's eastern suburbs, the ADP filled Jabal Mohsen's power vacuum, exchanging limited social provision (internal policing, health insurance for cadres and remittances for fighters) for local fealty and loyalty.

The third phase (2000–13) of the ADP's development witnessed a revival of Syrian–ADP relations, with the dynastic succession of Bashar al-Asad in Syria and Rifaat Eid to ADP throne. The rekindling of the Eid–Asad relationship facilitated a rebuilding of a 1,000-strong Alawi militia in Jabal Mohsen, ostensibly supplied with weapons from the retreating Syrian military in April 2005.[45] Some Lebanese commentators suggest that the Arab Knights were 'never properly disarmed' after the civil war and were in fact sustained through Hizballah, who provided Tripoli's Alawis with 'rhetorical cover but also military aid and weapons'.[46] Nevertheless, Lebanese politics polarised into rival camps in the aftermath of Hariri's assassination: the Pro Syrian 'March 8' alliance led by Hizballah which included Amal, SSNP, ADP, and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (joined in February 2006), and an anti-Syrian 'March 14' coalition led by the Saad Hariri's Future Movement, Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces, and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (which later left in 2009). Violent confrontations broke out between members of these rival currents in the summer of 2008—the Future Movement came under rapid attack from Hizballah, SSNP and Amal fighters in Beirut, while Future backed Sunni militias launched offensives against the ADP in Tripoli. Since Syria's abrupt military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Bashir al-Asad sought to shore up his Alawi allies, through a consolidation and unification of Rifaat al-Eid's power base within Jabal Mohsen—enabling him to

centralise field-commanders and fighters, and coordinate the supply of weapons and targeting of attacks.[47] The May 2008 gun battles in Jabal Mohsen/Bab al-Tabbaneh further galvanised ADP support, as a frightened populace turned to their only armed protector. Yet as Maren Milligan suggests, the ADP's thuggish mercenary rule left many residents 'as afraid of their champions as they are of rival militias'.[48] As one Alawi activist affirms, Rifaat al-Eid provides nothing more than 'arms and TV interviews', driving the mechanics of war and manipulating the media story. He explains further:

> The way it stands now in Jabal Mohsen, is that Rifaat Eid has no [real] following. He gives out money, he has media [onside], a political line (*khatt siyasi*) and weapons.... Within Jabal Mohsen they all know Rifat Eid is not a good leader, but the conflict in Syria and the checkpoints in Jabal Mohsen are leading them to say—never mind, just at this minute, we stay with Rifat Eid.[49]

A fourth and perhaps the most dramatic phase in ADP's short history is currently taking place. In July 2014, Rifaat and Ali Eid reportedly fled from Lebanon to Syria to avoid criminal charges linked to the al-Taqwa and al-Salam mosque bombings and indictments for supporting and carrying out 'terrorist acts in Tripoli'.[50] The coordinated military crackdown on Sunni and Alawi fighters has led some commentators to herald 'a historic opportunity for Lebanese Alawites to search for new leaders who embrace a more independent approach towards Damascus and a more conciliatory posture towards Tripoli's Sunni majority'.[51] Others are less sanguine in their analysis, pointing to the ADP networks that still remain in place, the division amongst alternative Alawi leaders who have little influence in Jabal Mohsen, and the fact that some residents see Eid's departure as a temporary sacrifice to avoid a greater conflict.[52] Lebanese journalist Jihad al-Zayn rightly cautions against hasty predictions, given that 'the fate of the ADP is linked to the fate of Syria' and therefore 'we must await the fate of Syria before we can conclude on the fate of the ADP'.[53] While the ADP's future hangs in the balance, it is crucial to explore the legacy and long-term impact of Jabal Mohsen's urban transfiguration through decades of conflict.

A neighbourhood distorted through violence

In Scott Bollens' comparative exploration of urban conflict, *City and Soul in Divided Societies*, he suggests that 'Life in polarized cities constitutes a different normal, where urban separations overlap cultural fault-lines and where long memories fit into tight spaces.'[54] The densely packed neighbourhoods of

Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh are physically divided by the (often) tank-lined, barricaded, pock-marked contours of Syria Street. Their mnemonic rupture, however, lies much deeper, in the Alawi expulsion of 1976 and the 1986 massacre of hundreds of Sunnis in Bab al-Tabbaneh. Both traumatic memories are etched in local histories and collective imaginations; both events are blamed entirely on the opposing neighbourhood.[55]

The 1986 killings in Bab al-Tabbaneh, estimated at around 200–400 deaths[56] and carried out by the Syrian Army and ADP fighters, crushed the Islamic Unity movement (*haraket al-Tawhid al-Islami*) and its populist leader Khalil Akkawi (Abu Arabi), but also created a legacy of communal resentment and rage. Lebanese journalist Mohammad Abi Samra describes this as the 'revenge of the wretched':

> Since the violent end of the Islamic Unity Movement Emirate and Khalil Akkawi's tenure as *Meshyakha Shebab* [neighbourhood organization led by local Sheikh] in 1986, a culture of poverty and armed anger has arisen as a reaction to the concealed resentment simmering in Bab al-Tabaneh, especially among the children of the conscripts of the lost emirate and *Meshyakha*. Not finding an outlet for their repressed anger, one can understand how movements like *ash-Shebab al-Mu'min* [The Believers] would have special appeal to groups of orphaned youngsters who had nothing to look forward to but a life of delinquency, cruelty and violence.[57]

Narratives of pain and suffering in Tripoli not only help fuel sectarian discourses, but create and sustain sectarian landscapes—homogeneous, urban enclaves, surrounded by impermeable thresholds and demarcated space.[58] Wendy Pullan refers to these as 'conflict's infastructures'—the 'walls, barriers, buffer zones, mobility regimes' which 'rupture cities to form frontiers that damage the urban fabric and everyday life so that what should connect and benefit from contact does not'.[59]

Jabal Mohsen is a frontier suburb, surrounded on all fours sides by predominantly Sunni neighbourhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh, Qobbeh, Riva, Mankoubin and the Palestinian camp of Beddawi (Fig. 9.1). As one local resident declares, we live in a 'windowless room', disconnected from the state and encircled by hostile neighbours. An ADP cadre goes further: 'In Jabal Mohsen, we are both abstractly and physically under siege.... We are surrounded in every sense of the word, from every direction. Physically, in that we are on the front line and abstractly in that each individual in Jabal Mohsen now considers himself to be a potential target.'[60] Lebanese Army checkpoints, tanks and soldiers are deployed along the fractured urban interfaces to regulate access and periodically enforce closure. Housing on the periphery of Jabal

Mohsen serves as an active front line and is riddled with bullet holes—representing a prime location for Alawi snipers and the inevitable target of retaliatory gunfire (Fig. 9.2). These homes form the poorest and most vulnerable neighbourhoods of the district, such as *al-hara al-jadid* facing Bab al-Tabbaneh, yet they remain occupied due to their cheap rental value. Families may temporarily vacate them when battles erupt; sometimes they can be trapped inside for the duration of the hostilities, but often out of necessity they return to patch up the detritus of war. Prolonged conflict has transfigured everyday architecture: a tour of the neighbourhood reveals sandbagged barricades between buildings; makeshift tunnels and trenches built to avoid sniper fire; abandoned top floor apartments; and mobile steel anti-sniper barriers which read, 'Be careful—danger of death from snipers'. (See Fig. 9.3.)

Unlike other urban conflicts there is no buffer zone to separate combatants, or allow an effective military presence to de-escalate hostilities. The army positions itself along Syria Street and the adjacent Jabal Mohsen heights, integrated between occupied apartment blocks and shops, yet the common

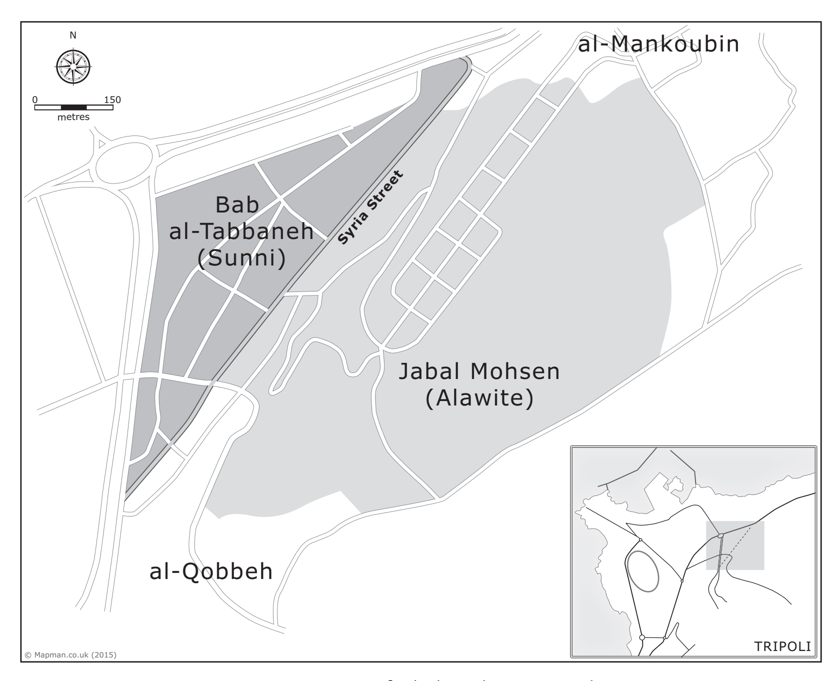


Fig. 9.1: Map of Jabal Mohsen, Tripoli



Fig. 9.2: A sniper view down into Bab al-Tabbaneh (Photo by Alex Potter, 2014)



Fig. 9.3: Anti-sniper barricade in Jabal Mohsen (Photo by Craig Larkin, December 2013)

perception remains that Lebanese soldiers are incapable and unwilling to intervene and that the state practices a policy of 'negative neutrality'.[61] As one civil activist from Tripoli explains, 'Recently a Bab al-Tabanneh militia leader came to Colonel Gemayell from the fourth section of the Lebanese army and asked him why the army were not shooting at the snipers firing from Jabal Mohsen. He told him, "I don't want to lose any men from the Lebanese Army in this conflict."'[62]

Fears of the army's indifference and ineptitude have, however, been replaced with concerns over the politicisation and fragmentation of the Lebanese security services. The Lebanese security apparatus, in Elizabeth Picard's words, has become 'domestically bifurcated and internationally subordinate'.[63] The polarisation is between a Lebanese Army that has increased its coordination with Hizballah and other Syrian allies, and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) who are accused of being the armed wing of 14 March and particularly partisan in its protection of Sunni communities and the Future movement leadership.[64] Overlapping and competing intelligence branches—Military Intelligence, General Directorate of State Security (Sûreté Général) and the ISF's Information branch—add to a sense of security dissolution, as each are linked to confessional/political leaders and have obstructed the exchange of information and coordination of collective policing.

Within Tripoli, these acute divisions are all too apparent in both communal rhetoric and street presence: the ISF are more prevalent in Bab al-Tabbaneh, while the Lebanese Army patrol Jabal Mohsen. In July 2013, at a meeting of Tripoli's senior clerics, Sheikh al-Rifai declared, 'The [Lebanese] judiciary and army are subservient to the Iranian project. The orders come from Iran, are received by the judiciary and then the warrants are issued against Sunni youths.'[65] In November 2013, ADP leader Rifaat Eid accused the ISF of following a Saudi agenda and that their torture of Alawi suspects would lead to reprisals: 'The Information Branch [of the Internal Security Force] has made the [shedding of] Alawite blood permissible, therefore the [shedding] of their blood by us is also permissible.'[66] These sectarian accusations of regional complicity underscore popular concerns as to whether Lebanese security forces can remain neutral and autonomous. The fear, as Picard astutely observes, is that 'the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) along with the Internal Security Forces (ISF)' become 'agents of a globalized struggle between Western powers and the Middle Eastern Islamic network'.[67]

Violent conflict has undoubtedly transformed and physically dislocated Jabal Mohsen—yet perversely it has also created a symbiotic 'economy of war'

that unites fighters and merchants from rival neighbourhoods. It is not uncommon to hear testimony of Alawi fighters and Sunni field commanders buying weapons and ammunition from each other;[68] similarly merchants from opposing suburbs pay protection money to stop their shops being targeted during street battles. An *al-Hayat* investigative report into Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh highlights the dynamic intersection between economic prosperity and military authority. The economy of war functions through a three-tier hierarchy of 'funders', 'mediators' (field commanders) and 'fighters'. In Bab al-Tabbaneh the militia funders are mainly local politicians—Mikati, Safadi, Hariri, Kabbara, Karami—in coordination with Gulf States (Qatar and Saudi), while the field commanders are often merchants (Ziad Allouki—wheat market; Saad al-Masri—vegetable market) or religious clerics (Sheikh Housam Sabbagh and Sheikh Khaled al-Sayyed).[69] Actual fighters are drawn from the ranks of unemployed youth, casual workers from the markets, and Salafist converts who are paid monthly salaries and covered for medical services.

Within Jabal Mohsen, Rifaat Eid remains the 'only war broker' and field commanders are often independent employers—factory owners, construction workers, merchants and taxi services.[70] The ADP compensates and arms the field commanders, who in turn provide for their fighters, in an attempt to preserve loyalty and maintain their services. The imprisonment of militia leaders and ceasefires, such as those imposed by the 2014 security plan, often lead to internal power struggles and a new negotiation of territorial control. The war economy inevitably perpetuates cycles of violence, as it is predicated on social poverty, coercive force and political marginalisation. As a 2010 International Crisis Group Report on Bab-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen strikingly concludes:

> What can the youth of these areas aspire to other than armed conflict which gives them the opportunity to learn how to bear arms and earn a little money? It is not grand principles or political or religious allegiances which drive these young men to fight. It is more their material needs, their absence of perspective and the hopeless situation in which they find themselves.[71]

A disillusioned fighter who mans the Tabbaneh-Mohsen line concurs: 'We are sick of merchants who trade in blood, those so-called "Field commanders". Nobody gives you a bullet for free and without something in return. We know that. Some of the Sheikhs and leaders on the ground are getting paid in our name.'[72] Although many residents of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh are cognisant of their vulnerable status, there is little consensus on how they can ultimately effect change. There do exist, however, amidst the conflict, a number of diverging and contradictory discourses concerning how Jabal Mohsen

should be imagined and represented. These invariably reflect internal Alawi power struggles but also reveal complex and shifting negotiations of religious identity, national allegiance and regional sponsorship.

Imagining Jabal Mohsen: ghetto, hostage, orphan

The embattled ghetto

The most prevalent narrative recounted by Jabal Mohsen residents is that of lives confined within a besieged ghetto, punctuated by endless battles (*mu'aarik*). Indeed, battles—which are often numbered, named after a specific neighbourhood, holiday (*eid*) or martyr (*shahid*)—provide temporal discursive frames for everyday life; equally they differentiate in death, with an allotted graveyard plot designated for the 'martyrs of battles'.[73] Jabal Mohsen's communal graveyard is adorned at its entrance with a tiled inscription, 'Our Great Martyrs' (*shahidouna a'zimouna*), while its outer walls are replete with newly posted martyr placards (Figs. 9.4 and 9.5). These personal poster boards



Fig. 9.4: Jabal Mohsen Graveyard 'Our Great Martyrs' (Photo by Craig Larkin, December 2013)

attest to the immediacy of the conflict, but they also confirm the individuality of each martyr, and how each family chooses to interpret their loved one's sacrifice and legacy.

Some posters contain, simply, informal portraits and names—these are the innocent victims of Jabal Mohsen's street battles. Other placards depict valiant fighters in military fatigues holding sniper rifles with telescopic lenses. One placard mourns the loss of 'heroic martyr' Talib Hasan Mama who died fighting with the Lebanese Army, dressed in his uniform; another mourns the 'heroic martryr' Ali Mahmud Shabib whose image is transposed on a Syrian flag with the epithet 'God have mercy on the youth of Jabal Mohsen and God protect Syria'. A number of posters have the immortalised potraits of Hafez and Bashar al-Asad affirming the martyrs and confirming their Syrian Ba'athist loyalties; others prefer the legendary Alawi freedom fighter, Sheikh Saleh al-Ali, who led the Syrian Revolt of 1919 against the French Mandate authorities. Few of the posters in Jabal Mohsen have Quranic verses or employ religious imagery, clearly distinguishing them from Lebanese Shi'a martyrs, whose posters which often contain *ayaats*, religious emblems, or visual references to Imam Ali or Hussein. By and large, the 'living dead' of Jabal Mohsen



Fig. 9.5: Martyr posters, Jabal Mohsen (Photo by Craig Larkin, December 2013)

allude to a secular territorial struggle, invoking Syrian loyalties but acknowledging Lebanese realities.

The posters are unsurprisingly consistent with the ADP's narrative which evokes Jabal Mohsen as both a beleaguered neighbourhood but also a stronghold of secular resistance against an amorphous extremist enemy. Ali Fedda explains, 'We have been here for a long time, we are going to stay here and everything we are doing is to defend our presence in the face of takfiri salafists that make no distinction between Sunni, Shi'a or Christian.'[74] ADP leader Rifat al-Eid is even more explicit in framing Jabal Mohsen as not only a bulwark against Tripoli's salafi threat, but as a sacrificial 'arena' of geopolitical clashes. He elucidates:

> The axis [Syria-Iran-Hizballah] has recently made many achievements. It seems that everyone accepts these days for the Jabal Mohsen to be an arena for letting off steam by the other side. This is a painful and cruel equation: that we have to serve our project, cause, and convictions at the expense of our blood...we are not always able to make our people in the Jabal understand that patience is the best course of action.[75]

Eid's complicit acceptance of the 'painful and cruel equation', that Jabal Mohsen's security is sacrificed to consolidate strategic alliances with Syria and Hizballah, is a point not lost on his many critics. An increasing number of Tripoli's Alawis are unwilling to serve what they perceive to be Eid's 'project, cause and convictions' or tolerate Jabal Mohsen becoming an 'arena for letting off steam'.

The defenceless hostage

An alternative imagining of Jabal Mohsen is that of the defenceless hostage—first, held against its will by the authoritarian and coercive power of the Eid clan, and second, subservient to the irresistible forces of regional politics. Critiques of the Eid dynasty are not a new phenomenon, particularly among the educated Lebanese Alawi middle class and disaffected intellectuals who mostly reside outside Jabal Mohsen. However, growing internal dissent over nepotism, corruption, economic mismanagement and brutal communal policing tactics are gradually emerging. In the words of a former high-ranking ADP official, 'The Party does not exist any more—it has become an empty shell, a mere cover for the activities of a few.'[76] One prominent ADP critic is Tripoli's Alawi deputy Badr Wannous, who acknowledges that his political seat is based on close alignment to Hariri's Future Movement which 'needed an Alawite personality on their list who was anti-Eid Clan'.[77] According to Wannous:

> Today the Arab Democratic Party (Rifat Eid and his father Ali) is practising a form of terrorism against the Alawi people much greater than that which they are waging on the people of Tripoli.... The ADP is a 'cancer' on Lebanon's Alawi sect...and the open wound so evident in Jabal Mohsen is inflicted by the Eid Clan and as such before the conflict is Sunni-Alawi, it is Alawi-Alawi.[78]

This inflammatory denunciation of the Eids' hegemony and corrosive influence in Jabal Mohsen reveals underlying Alawi class and cultural tensions. For Wannous, Jabal Mohsen has become a deprived and rebellious blight on the cultured and distinguished heritage of Lebanon's Alawi; a backward and uncivilised front which supplies fodder for conflict and 'foot-soldiers' committed to the axis of resistance. Arine Hassan, a prominent Tripoli lawyer and Alawi civil activist, instead points to the lack of services and facilities in Jabal Mohsen, which he blames on the ADP's ineptitude. Eid's prioritisation of war over 'cultural, social, economic development' imprisons Jabal Mohsen's residents and offers them no future. He passionately insists:

> Our people are dying with each round...our children can't go to school, our children can't go down to Tripoli because they are firing shots, economically trade is suffering because they're not able to work.... I mean, look at Hizballah, they've taken up [armed] conflict but they have a result for their people—they are building associations for them, giving them money. And us, what do we have up there? Come to Jabal Mohsen, every ten metres there is a cafe; there are about 200 cafes in Jabal Mohsen, yet there is no library in Jabal Mohsen.... There is nothing in Jabal Mohsen, only two or three streets, and Bashar al-Asad and Rifat Eid.[79]

Interestingly, this critique distinguishes the ADP from its political ally Hizballah, whose 'holistic resistance' (*al-muqawama al-shammilah*) includes an ideological platform and an array of social services: 'The Association of Islamic Health' (*Jam'iyyat Hayy'at al-Sihiyyat al-Islamiyyat*); 'Institution for Construction and Redevelopment' (*Jihad al-Binna*); 'The Wounded Foundation' (*Mu'assat al-Jarha*); and 'The Education Foundation' (al-Mu'asasa al-*Tarbawiyya*).[80] For Hassan, the ADP's ideological vacuum and anti-intellectualism, alongside their failure to deliver communal services, renders them a dangerous repressive presence in Jabal Mohsen.

The second hostage trope is perhaps the most commonly drawn upon—Tripoli as the strategic battlefield of regional powers (Syria, Iran, Saudi, Qatar and Kuwait) and geopolitical currents (salafi–jihadism, the resistance axis and Western interventionism). Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh therefore represent a '*zone d'affrontement par procuration*',[81] with external actors transposing their conflicts onto Tripoli's domestic stage, supporting 'local' fighters in a fight that is infinitely cheaper and more manageable that any war raging in the

Lebanese capital would be.[82] Nawaf Kabbara illustrates the point: 'The growing sectarianism in Tripoli is linked to the deepening Syrian conflict. Regionally Iran and Saudi Arabia are vying for control and [the] implementation of different Islamic visions. The events on the streets of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh are ripples from larger waves in Tehran and Riyadh.'[83]

Undoubtedly Tripoli is imperilled by the Syrian civil war and its conflicts synonymous with Lebanon's divided response to it. How beholden actually are its politicians and residents to regional dynamics and foreign patrons? How accurate is it to view Jabal Mohsen as a pawn in a geo-political game of chess or a 'buffer zone' which has repeatedly absorbed the shock and trauma of national, and international, political, economic and socio-sectarian power plays? There are no clear answers to these questions. However, interviewees across Tripoli's political spectrum were adamant in their analysis that the city remains a 'regional postbox' for the delivery of strategic messages, veiled threats and the occasional parcel bomb. Ali Fedda explains further:

> Saudi Arabia considers Tripoli to be the postbox through which they can send letters to Syria, and even to Hizballah and Iran. When the battle of Qalamoun started, Saudi was saying through its papers and media outlets that if Hizballah and the Free Syrian Army were to engage in battle at Qalamoun it would open the flood gates for conflict in Lebanon; starting with Tripoli.[84]

Despite Fedda's partisan analysis, he is correct in linking escalating local tensions to broader events such as the battles that took place in Qalamoun or Qusayr, or more recently the violent confrontation that occurred in Arsal between the Lebanese Army (and Hizballah) and Islamic State (ISIS) in August 2014, which led to protests and roadblocks in Bab al-Tabbaneh and the attempted intervention of local salafi sheikhs.[85] Likewise, Jabal Mohsen remains a symbolic Alawi barometer reflecting the ebbs and flows of the conflict in neighbouring Syria. While some analysts are keen to place Jabal Mohsen within the wider 'Shi'a Crescent' discourse[86]—linking it to Iran's ever expanding regional influence through Shi'a militia groups (Hizballah, As'aib Ahl al-Haq and Abu Fadl Al-Abbas) currently fighting in Syria and Iraq, this approach is fundamentally flawed. Firstly, although Jabal Mohsen and the ADP have at times facilitated Asad's intelligence operatives, its local fighters are not engaged in a broader conflict or participating in the Syrian civil war. Secondly, it is important not to conflate geo-strategic military convergence or tactical alliances with presumed shared religious ideological visions. Lebanese Alawis are not natural bedfellows of Hizballah fighters, Houthi tribesmen, Iranian Basij or Sadrist militias—they do not believe or conform to orthodox

Twelver Shi'ism, nor are they likely to fight or die for Khomeini's Islamic polity based on his doctrine of '*Wilayet al-Fiqh*'. These disparate groups may be currently united by a common Sunni *Salafist* enemy (ISIS/al-Qaeda) and unified through a shared religious lexicon of dispossession, yet they remain subject to national agendas, local support bases, a plurality of religious authorities (*Shi'a marj'iyya*)[87] and ethnic (Arab, Persian) and tribal loyalties. It is disingenuous therefore to view Tripoli as merely a 'regional postbox'; it remains primarily a pressure valve or focal point for broader Lebanese conflicts—a domestic arena that allows internal tensions to be relieved and contained, that permits elite power struggles to be exercised, and provides through 'insecurity' a distraction from the real problems of social deprivation and corruption.

The abandoned orphan

The final dominant narrative of Jabal Mohsen is that of the abandoned orphan: rejected by the Lebanese state and denied access to socio-economic provision due to its perceived (dis)loyalties. As one resident from Jabal Mohsen explains, 'Not only is the state absent from Jabal Mohsen, but it is denying us our Lebanese identity. We are continually being blamed for our Alawi origins.... We want the State but the State does not want us.'[88]

The Alawi sense of abandonment is not a unique phenomenon in Lebanon's second largest city. Tripoli, as Hilal Khashan notes, 'has no place on the Lebanese economic, developmental and tourist[ic] map as its name has become synonymous with poverty, misery and deprivation'.[89] Wages are as low as $170 a month, compared to the average Lebanese wages of $355; and youth unemployment is 45 percent, while 57 percent of Tripoli's population live below the poverty line, compared to a 28 percent national average. Therefore many question the state's long-standing (unofficial) policy of non-investment and neglect.[90] The statistics and realities in Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen are even worse. In both districts less than 3 percent of students attend secondary school; over 82 percent do not have medical insurance; over 63 percent of residents live on less than $4 per day. Basic public services in the area are minimal; the education system is barely functional with the highest rates of truancy in Lebanon; and for the young people of the area, unemployment is a likely consequence. The precarious economic situation, combined with feelings of abandonment and marginalisation, fed a militia culture where socio-economic deprivation and exclusion leave the Alawi community with few options other

than to rally behind a political party, which, while offering little in the way of physical protection,[91] can at least offer the promise of violent reprisal.

The second component, and perhaps the most controversial aspect of the Alawi sense of abandonment, relates to their loyalty (*al-wala'*) to the Lebanese state. The product of the overwhelming perception of socio-economic marginalisation by the state within the Alawi community of Jabal Mohsen is reduced trust in, and by extension loyalty to, the state. The near total 'absence of the state doing its part'[92] has fostered the community's historic sense of being a disadvantaged minority and led to a situation where party politicians in the northern reaches of the country, aware of this fact, exploit these feelings of marginalisation to further their own interests.[93]

Within Jabal Mohsen, Syrian flags and Asad posters attest to conflicting allegiances, but it is too simplistic to equate them with national betrayal; rather they reflect Lebanese sectarian politics and patron–client dynamics. One Alawi resident of Jabal Mohsen, Kawkab Ibrahim, explains the situation thus: power in Lebanon today is 'built on the foundations of sect, tribe or clan [and]…as such, it is natural that minorities feel the need to protect themselves and strengthen their sources of power…and [it is] inevitable that minority sects have been uniting under the leader of their sect, whether he is Lebanese or not'.[94] In fact, in a recent study of the Alawi inhabitants of Jabal Mohsen, 43 percent of respondents professed political loyalty to a non-Lebanese leader.[95]

This sense of national ambiguity is certainly not expressed by all of Tripoli's Alawi community. Those dwelling outside the Jabal, with ties, relations and economic interests integrated within wider Lebanese society are very clear in their position: 'We are Lebanese, our allegiance is to Lebanon and to the Lebanese state, to the Lebanese Army, to the land that we were raised on, to our surroundings, the people, that is to whom our allegiance is.'[96] Such voices speak to the heterogeneous nature of Lebanon's Alawi community.

Conclusions: 'It's not sectarian, it's just security'

The most common Lebanese assessment of Tripoli's tempestuous politics is that 'it's not sectarian (*mish ta'ifiyya*), it's just security (*bas difaa'yya*)'.[97] The wisdom of such analysis is perhaps confirmed by the relative success of the latest military crackdown. Violence has been temporarily contained, militia leaders imprisoned and a number of street barricades removed. Unfortunately, sectarianism and security are a false dichotomy; Tripoli's troubles go much deeper and will require more systematic reforms, economic investment, urban

development and a restructuring of political and communal power as it manifests itself on the streets of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh.

The Alawis of Tripoli may stand at a crossroads: loosened from the grip of the Eid clan and their damaging alliance with the Syrian regime, but remaining uncertain and unconvinced of their position with Lebanon, as a vulnerable 'leaderless' minority. As this research confirms, there are a number of diverging Alawi voices and actors, yet none as of yet has emerged to challenge the ADP's legacy and their residual influence within Jabal Mohsen. Indeed, it is too soon to herald a total break from the past, and Tripoli's Alawi community remains indelibly linked to the fate of Asad's regime in Damascus.

Arguably, too many actors (Lebanese and external patrons) are invested and benefit from Tripoli's 'politics of instability' to allow for systematic change. Street clashes and subsequent truces are often orchestrated and managed by political elites to pressure government policies or consolidate neighbourhood support. Tripoli's Sunni politicians have simultaneously procured weapons and funds for militia fighters, called for the integration of militia fighters within the Lebanese Army, and facilitated their imprisonment and subsequent release.[98] The current detainment, but non-trial, of Tripoli's militia leaders attests to the ongoing political power struggle between the Future Movement and former Prime Minister Najib Miqati. As one anonymous Tripoli politician explains, 'The files of these individuals are not being dealt with quickly... it is difficult for them to go on trial and defend themselves and relay their experience of receiving support and funding and even arming from political and security services.'[99] The recent release of a number of Bab al-Tabbaneh's militia leaders—Amr Arish and Abou Taymour al-Dandashi (July 2014)—may possibly pave the way for a future amnesty (covering the Tripoli clashes) and the reciprocal rehabilitation of the Eid clan within Jabal Mohsen. What is more certain, however, is that the current power vacuum left by Tripoli's imprisoned militia leaders has been filled by more extreme Salafi–jihadist groups. Indeed, Bab al-Tabbaneh has witnessed the emergence of a Jabhat al-Nusra affiliated faction, led by Chadi Mawlawi and Osama Mansour, taking control of the Abdullah bin Masoud mosque and enforcing strict social rules on the neighbourhood.[100] A subsequent military crackdown in Bab al-Tabbaneh in October 2014 resulted in the death of eleven Lebanese soldiers, eight civilians and twenty-two militants; with hundreds of Islamists encarcerated in Roumieh Prison.[101] Despite increasing military incursions, weapon confiscations and the recent shooting of Islamist fugitive Osama Mansour, Jubhat al-Nusra appear to be growing in strength. In January 2015, two local Jabhat

al-Nusra operatives, Taha Samir al-Khayal, and Bilal Mohammad al-Mariyan carried out a double suicide attack in a Jabhat Mohsen café, killing nine and wounding thirty others.[102] The escalation of local violence and spiralling social deprivation—exacerbated by the influx of Syrian refugees—may lead to new political compromises, not precluding the future release and co-option of Tripoli's former militia leaders.

While Tripoli remains sensitive to regional re-alignments, its fragility also lies in the fractures within the Lebanese security apparatus. Lebanese intelligence branches from both the Lebanese Army and the ISF were implicated in communal feuds; meanwhile doubts remain over the army's ability to maintain neutrality, or indeed unity, in the face of sectarian polarisation. The war in Syria and the dangerous infiltration of Islamic State fighters into Lebanese territory exposed the weakness of the current Lebanese Sunni leadership and the need for strategic coordination between Hizballah, the army and the ISF. Ultimately, Tripoli's future stability and Alawi integration within the city depend on how Lebanese authorities address both the city's short-term security needs and its longer-term structural inequalities.

PART IV

ALAWIS IN CONFLICT AND CONTESTATION

10

CHASING GHOSTS

THE *SHABIHA* PHENOMENON

Aron Lund

In March 2011, protests against President Bashar al-Asad spread across Syria, despite government efforts to suppress the demonstrations with force. By the end of the year, armed resistance groups had emerged and guerrilla battles raged in Homs, Idlib, Aleppo and several other provinces. By the summer of 2012, Syria was in the throes of a major civil war, torn apart by violence, political and sectarian fragmentation, and foreign interference. While the government initially lost control of large tracts of Syria, particularly in the Sunni Muslim Arab countryside where the insurgent forces were strongest and the army lacked sufficient manpower to claim and hold hostile territory, the situation began to stabilise in mid-2013. A year later, it was clear that the tide had turned, with Asad's forces seemingly well entrenched and even reclaiming some territory, although the regime's long-term prospects remain highly uncertain.

There are many reasons for this dynamic reversal of fortunes: the generous financial and military support from allies such as Russia and Iran; the opposition's failure to unify its ranks and attract the support of Syria's religious minorities; and—perhaps most significantly—the ongoing failure of the

opposition to provide a credible alternative to Asad's government. However, a further important reason for the shift in Bashar al-Asad's fortunes was the mass recruitment of civilian fighters to support and relieve the official Syrian Army, which suffered from poor morale and regular defections of Sunni soldiers. Already in March 2011, anti-government demonstrators were reporting attacks by what they termed the *Shabiha*, a nebulous label used to describe a wide variety of pro-Asad vigilantes and militia groups. During the initial waves of popular street protests, the state encouraged the formation of local gangs, often composed of Alawis or other minority groups that felt threatened by the Sunni-dominated uprising. As the protest movement morphed into a violent insurgency, these militias grew in numbers, strength and sophistication. The Asad regime also gained the support of thousands of non-Syrian Shi'a fighters from Iraq and Lebanon, typically supported by the government of Iran. Both the Syrian militia networks and Iranian- and Iraqi-backed Shi'a militias are now an indispensable feature of Asad's armed forces. They are active in all parts of the country and their combined numbers may even rival the remaining forces of the Syrian Army.[1]

The opposition movement continues to refer to most of these civilian fighters as *Shabiha*, a word that gained currency almost by accident in late March 2011. As a descriptive term it is of little value, obfuscating rather than shedding light on the complex and evolving nature of Asad's civilian militias. The indiscriminate labelling of any and all pro-government fighters as *Shabiha* has in fact served to conceal the extraordinary diversity of the paramilitary groups fighting for Asad.

This chapter seeks to deconstruct the imprecise *Shabiha* discourses and shed light on the phenomenon of pro-government militias in Syria. It is crucial to begin with an examination of the etymology and origins of the term *Shabiha*. The chapter will then explore the process by which such forces have evolved from irregular, local networks into large paramilitary organisations. In conclusion, it will argue that while embracing civilian militias and non-Syrian Shi'a fighters may have helped reinforce Asad's authority, the state's increased reliance on local grassroots militias and foreign fighters may present a long-term challenge to the regime's cohesion and political sovereignty.

The Shabiha phenomenon: a war of words

In early 2011, Syria was not only caught up in the beginnings of a civil uprising, but also a rhetorical battle, as Asad's supporters and detractors struggled

to define the conflict in their own terms and influence regional and international media coverage. Government supporters and the regime-controlled media would typically refer to demonstrators as *mundassin* (infiltrators), *irhabiyin* (terrorists) or *'isabat musallaha* (armed gangs). The opposition responded by mocking Asad's supporters as *minhabbakjiyeh*, a neologism translating approximately as 'we-love-you-ers', in reference to the state-promoted cult of personality surrounding the president.[2]

It was in this context that the term *Shabiha* debuted in opposition discourse, referring to groups of civilian regime supporters who attacked demonstrators, using fists, clubs, knives and even firearms, typically acting under the command of intelligence officials in civilian clothing. Rabie, an activist who took part in many early demonstrations but has since been forced to flee Syria, vividly recalls the *Shabiha* groups in Damascus in 2011:

> The government used al-Abbasiyin, a large football stadium in the heart of Damascus, as a sort of centre for them. They stationed around a thousand soldiers there and then they stopped a lot of public buses and gave them to the *Shabiha* as a means of transportation. I used to see them drive around all day in those buses, heading for areas where demonstrations were being held. When a demonstration began it would take perhaps ten minutes until someone working in security, or someone working for security, would call the police. Then they would come. Sometimes they brought the Mukhabarat—the security services—with them, but they did not wear uniforms. You couldn't recognise them, just some of them who came from the coast, because you could recognise their dialect.[3]

Yet the word *Shabiha* was not newly coined. While numerous sources agree that it had previously referred to regime-connected Alawi criminal gangs on the Syrian coast, its origins and exact meaning have been disputed. The Arabic root consonants *sh-b-h* (ش - ب - ح) form the word for 'ghost': *Shabh* pl. *Shubouh*. Many Syrians and international reporters found this a sufficiently menacing explanation and did not investigate further, but others have tried to trace its origins. One theory connected the word to a Mercedes car model known in Syria as the *Shabh*, which was said to have been popular with the abovementioned criminal gangs.[4] However, the Arabic *sh-b-h* root can also carry other meanings, including 'to be strong' or 'to rip apart'. In the Arabic vernacular spoken by the Alawis of the coastal region, this root has been used to convey 'fast spectacular action', such as when young men dive into water or when football goalkeepers leap into the air to catch a ball. The word 'Shabih' could thus signify a tough, manly, or daring person.[5] In this sense, it had long been applied to smugglers working the Syrian–Lebanese borderlands, and it was in this context that it would come to be associated with the Asad family.

The Asad family Shabiha

In March 1963, a *coup d'état* involving several military officers from coastal Alawi families brought the Ba'ath Party to power in Syria. Continued instability and internal purges gradually cemented the dominance of Alawi officer cliques throughout the military and, by extension, in the Ba'ath Party and civilian politics.[6]

When Hafez al-Asad became Syria's president after successive internal *coups* in 1969 and 1970, his relatives from Qardaha in Latakia province began to assert control over economic life on the coast, including the thriving smuggling business. The first member of the Asad family to become seriously involved in smuggling is said to have been Malek al-Asad, the son of Hafez's half-brother Ibrahim. Making use of family connections to set up a profitable illegal business in the latter half of the 1970s, Malek al-Asad subsequently drew the president's ire—allegedly by selling arms to Islamist insurgents—and his smuggling operations were shut down.[7]

The president's two younger brothers, Jamil and Rifaat, gradually acquired influence over organised crime in the Latakia area. Jamil al-Asad's sons, Mondher and (more significantly) Fawwaz, were both involved in coastal smuggling rackets, and with time the term *Shabiha* came to apply to Fawwaz al-Asad's entourage and similar groups. Predominantly Alawi, and typically led by a member of the ruling family, these *Shabiha* groups became infamous for their violent and reckless behaviour and for their involvement in extortion and organised crime.[8]

'By the 1980s the *Shabiha* were untouchable and operated with impunity in the coastal city of Latakia', writes Syrian intellectual Yasin al-Haj Salih, who accuses the Asad family *Shabiha* of involvement in numerous crimes, including theft, kidnappings, rape and murder.[9] By the 1990s, the fortunes of the *Shabiha* groups had waned, partly because feuds within the ruling family exposed them to increased scrutiny. In 1984, Rifaat al-Asad was sent into exile after challenging President Hafez al-Asad's rule; Jamil al-Asad's branch of the family also appears to have lost influence. Soon after, Hafez began grooming his eldest son Bassel to be his successor. When Bassel was killed in a car accident in 1994, the president turned to his second son, Bashar, who succeeded him in the summer of 2000. To improve their public image, and perhaps to subdue potential rivals, both brothers sought to rein in the *Shabiha* gangs run by their cousins on the coast. Finally, international developments and economic reforms enacted in Syria during the 1990s and 2000s led to a decline in

smuggling profits, forcing many former *Shabiha* figures to find alternative sources of power and income.

The Shabiha reloaded

The term *Shabiha* was not commonly used when the Syrian uprising began; until late March 2011, the term applied only to the coastal criminal gangs described above. This changed after anti-government demonstrations and riots spread to Sunni communities in Latakia and Baniyas. After initial hesitation, the government clamped down on the demonstrators, killing several activists on 26 and 27 March 2011.[10] Local sources portrayed the perpetrators of these killings as a mixture of uniformed personnel and *Shabiha*—a term that would have been readily understood in the Latakia area but not necessarily anywhere else.

Drawing on local activist sources, on 27 March 2011, the Saudi-owned satellite news channel *al-Arabiya* broadcast a report on the violence in Latakia, which explained that the security forces were using 'criminal gangs called the *Shabiha*' to suppress the demonstrations. *Al-Arabiya* speculated that the *Shabiha* numbered between 5,000 and 10,000 personnel in Syria, suggesting that they came from Alawi-majority towns such as Jabla, Qardaha, Tartus and Latakia.[11] With Syrians and international observers scrambling to explain the reports of civilian Asad sympathisers attacking anti-government demonstrators, the term *Shabiha* spread quickly among activists and international reporters, who relied on these activists as sources.

The first occurrences of the word *Shabiha* in major American and European newspapers came after the *al-Arabiya* report. On 28 March, the British *Daily Telegraph* reported that 'members of the notorious Shabiha gang, which is linked to members of the Asad family, were deployed on the streets of Tartus and in a suburb of Damascus', describing the *Shabiha* as 'gangsters, armed with sticks and hunting rifles' and 'gunmen'.[12] Two days later, the French *L'Express* followed with an article describing the *Shabiha* as 'a Ba'athist militia tied to Maher al-Asad', the president's younger brother.[13] These reports quickly filtered back into Arabic media outlets and activist reports. Soon, the word was in general use by the opposition, among Syrian online activists and in the international media. For example, the international, Saudi-owned newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* used the word *Shabiha* for the first time on 30 March 2011, in an article based on the *Daily Telegraph* report published two days earlier.[14] After that, the word occurred regularly in *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and, by late sum-

mer, the term was sufficiently well established for the newspaper's editor-in-chief to lead with the headline 'Syria: The Shabiha Regime' without offering any explanation of the term.[15] At that point, the word was understood to mean 'Asad supporter' in general and 'member of a pro-Asad militia' in particular, and it was used in all areas of Syria, far beyond the coastal region where the 'real' *Shabiha* had operated.

In 2011 and 2012, Syria witnessed the emergence of a diverse and localised pro-regime militia movement, but neither the Syrian opposition nor the international media displayed much interest in understanding this phenomenon. The groups that attacked demonstrators were not uniform in origin: they included plain-clothes police, intelligence personnel, Ba'ath Party members and paramilitary groups,[16] government-linked tribal figures, and young men recruited for money by intelligence contacts or pro-regime businessmen. Yet the opposition continued to refer to every such group as 'the Shabiha'. Relying heavily on activist accounts from within Syria, the international media generally adopted this terminology. Many reporters and even government officials dealing with Syria appeared to be under the impression that an organised militia movement called 'the Shabiha' existed which was somehow connected to criminal activity on the Syrian coast in the 1980s.

In a June 2011 article dealing with armed groups in Homs, *The Economist* provides a typical example of how the militia phenomenon had come to be treated in the international media: 'Amateur video footage from various cities shows plain-clothed thugs—known as shabiha—committing atrocities. Many are members of the Asad clan or smugglers and racketeers from the coastal region. The leaders are thought to be Munzer [Mondher] and Fawwaz Asad, first cousins of President Bashar Asad.'[17]

In fact, at that time the *Shabiha* in Homs consisted of several so-called 'Popular Committees'. Their members were typically young, working-class Alawi men organised and armed by Syrian intelligence and funded by pro-Asad businessmen.[18] The Popular Committees in Homs seem to have been entirely local in origin and there is nothing to indicate a link to either Mondher or Fawwaz al-Asad or, for that matter, to coastal smuggling. Yet the widespread use of the *Shabiha* name kept bringing the historical *Shabiha* groups and their leaders back into view. In May 2011, the European Union issued sanctions against both Fawwaz and Mondher al-Asad on the grounds that they were 'part of the Shabiha militia'.[19] In December 2012, the US Department of the Treasury took the further step of freezing the economic assets of 'the Shabiha', as if it were an organised group with a budget and a bank account, rather than an invention of opposition invective.[20]

A political insult

In the context of the 2011 uprising, the term *Shabiha* was initially only used to describe violent pro-Asad civilians, but its meaning gradually expanded, weakening its association with physical violence. Soon, the word began to be used in a metaphorical sense about unarmed regime supporters—such as police informants, journalists, politicians and religious figures—to portray them as similar to the armed *Shabiha*. For example, the above-mentioned *al-Sharq al-Awsat* editorial column disparaged pro-Asad writers as 'Media Shabiha', as opposed to 'Security Shabiha'. Additionally, some activists and commentators began to use the word in reference to anyone working for the government, without seeking to create an analogy with armed groups. For example, opposition activist Rabie casually referred to government agents conducting surveillance in Internet cafés as *Shabiha*.[21] In fact, the opposition's use of Shabiha corresponds closely to the way in which government supporters will use a term like 'terrorists' (*irhabiyin*) to describe all armed rebels and sometimes also the civilians supporting them. While precise definitions can of course be construed for both *Shabiha* and 'terrorists', these words are not primarily intended to be used in a descriptive sense, but rather to insult, delegitimise and demonise an opponent.

Reacting to this, hard-line regime supporters re-appropriated the term for themselves in order to provoke and challenge the opposition. For example, pro-government demonstrators might proclaim themselves to be 'proud *Shabiha*' in the sense that they are willing to fight and die for the regime. When Bashar al-Asad spoke at a government-organised rally at Umayyad Square in Damascus in January 2012, the crowd greeted him with a popular pro-regime chant: *shabiha lil-abad li-ajl 'uyounak ya asad*, which literally translates as: '*Shabiha* forever, for your eyes, Asad'.[22]

The word is now also widely used as an insult in internal opposition feuds, to accuse rivals of being domineering or violent in a way reminiscent of the pro-Asad militias. For example, when the rebel coalition known as the Free Syrian Army tried to elect a new chief of staff in the spring of 2014, a physical scuffle broke out between the rival camps. The deposed chief of staff, Lieutenant General Salim Idriss, blamed his rivals for having started the fight and labelled their actions *tashbih*, or 'Shabiha behavior'.[23]

However, due to its historical association with the Alawi community and the nature of Syria's conflict, the term *Shabiha* is laden with sectarian baggage. Many opposition members will be careful to point out that a *Shabih* can come from any sect, while others casually use the word as a synonym for pro-regime

Alawi. For example, Alawi villages may be referred to as 'Shabiha villages' and some armed factions use phrases like *dakk ma'aqil al-shabbiha*, or 'levelling the strongholds of the *Shabiha*', as a euphemism for rocket fire into Alawi towns.[24]

In other words, the term Shabiha cannot be used in a purely descriptive sense or as an analytical category. Whatever its origins, it is now essentially a political insult flung at Asad's supporters, and pro-government fighters in particular, regardless of whether they are Alawi or not.

The pro-Asad militias

After half a century of Ba'ath Party rule, Bashar al-Asad faced the 2011 uprising with a vast array of state resources and patronage networks at his disposal. He controlled an army of more than 300,000 soldiers and four major intelligence agencies, with tens of thousands of full-time officers, along with contingents of smaller paramilitary groups, militias and police forces.

Many of Syria's local political, economic, tribal and religious elites had spent decades cultivating contacts in Damascus in efforts to improve their own position and manage relations with the central state. Over time, many such local powerbrokers became more or less firmly integrated with the regime's political base, gaining access to government jobs and patronage, but also making enemies in the process. Therefore, they had a vested interest in regime survival. In addition, a significant portion of the Syrian population was organised in the Ba'ath Party or dependent on the state bureaucracy. Even among those without any personal stake in the ruling system, many appeared genuinely convinced that President Asad—for all his flaws—was preferable to an opposition victory, or at least impossible to dislodge without major upheaval and perhaps state collapse. These views hardened as the uprising turned increasingly violent and sectarian, while democratic opposition forces proved incapable of controlling the growing Islamist-led insurgency.

As Syria descended into civil war over the course of 2011 and 2012, many regime supporters stepped forth, with or without government prompting, to offer their own services or those of their local client networks in defence of the status quo. Almost everywhere in Syria the government found itself able to draw on at least one segment of society, whether by using state and party institutions to mobilise and control the broader population or by exploiting pre-existing tribal or sectarian rivalries.

Syria's pro-government militia movement is sometimes described as an entirely Alawi or minority-based phenomenon, and while this may be an

opposition caricature, it is not without a kernel of truth. While most of the Sunni Muslim Arab countryside embraced the rebellion, all minority-populated areas remained in government hands after three years of conflict (as did nearly all major urban centres). Foreign and Syrian observers alike agree that the minority communities generally lean towards the government. The most fully mobilised pro-government constituency appears to be the non-Sunni minorities, particularly the Alawi community, which is often described as being at the core of the government's militia strategy. Many young men and even some women have volunteered for service, and Alawi villages are reported to have received significant quantities of weapons to bolster their defences and to aid the cultivation of pro-government militias.[25]

The significance of the role played by Syria's small Shi'a minority in the government war effort is its ability to act as a conduit for foreign support.[26] Rebel threats against Shi'a populations and sanctuaries in Syria have drawn a strong response from Shi'a Muslims in the wider Middle East, with thousands of volunteer fighters travelling to Syria from Iraq and Lebanon. This mobilisation—which will be discussed in greater detail below—is facilitated by the government of Iran, a long-time ally of the Asad regime. Iran and its various regional proxies have helped organise local militias among Syria's indigenous Shi'a Muslims. For example, groups trained by the Syrian government and Hizballah are reportedly active in the religiously mixed southern town of Bosra al-Sham, backed by Druze pro-government fighters from the nearby Sweida province.[27]

Among Syria's religious communities, Alawi and Shi'a Muslims are likely to be the most over-represented within the pro-Asad militia movement, but some Christian areas have also been fertile ground for recruitment. In Quseir, a town on the border with Lebanon, the government subcontracted early counter-insurgency efforts to certain members of a large Christian clan, the Kasouha, who helped set up checkpoints and harass opposition figures in 2011.[28] In addition, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), a secular nationalist movement active in both Syria and Lebanon, runs armed units in Christian areas of Homs, Rif Dimashq and Tartus provinces.[29] The SSNP has members from many sects, but is often perceived to function as a vehicle for the mobilisation of Syrian Christians.[30]

However, it would be a mistake to imagine that President Asad's militia forces or *Shabiha* are solely composed of religious minorities. Hassakeh province in north-eastern Syria is home to a complex ethno-religious mix and it presents an instructive example of the nuanced relations between Syria's government and local forces, including many Sunni Arabs.

In the northern part of Hassakeh province, Sunni Muslim Kurds are the single largest group and in many areas they hold a clear majority. Sunni Muslim Arabs also make up a substantial part of the population and there are smaller minorities of mostly ethnic Syriac and Armenian Christians. Due to the state's historically poor relations with the Kurds—whose national aspirations, culture and language were suppressed under the Ba'ath Party—Asad is now forced to compete with mostly Islamist rebel forces for support among the Sunni Arab tribal communities in Hassakeh. But the government has also courted Christian minorities who fear the ascent of Islamist opposition movements, while simultaneously seeking to exploit the opportunities generated by Arab–Kurdish ethnic tension in order to neutralise the Kurdish community.

Kurdish areas in Hassakeh province have fallen under the sway of armed groups loyal to the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), which is linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group fighting the Turkish government from its headquarters in Iraq. The Asad government did not oppose the PYD's takeover of Kurdish-majority cities, which took place in a matter of days in July 2012. This caused a dramatic downturn in Arab–Kurdish relations and kindled new intra-opposition rivalries, while the PYD and the Syrian government maintain a *modus vivendi* in the north-east by generally avoiding encroachment on each other's territory. The Syrian Arab Army remains only in minor enclaves in and around the northern city of Qamishli, concentrated in Arab neighbourhoods and around a number of government institutions left untouched by the PYD, such as the airport and certain administrative buildings. However, regime forces operate at considerably greater strength in the Arab-majority areas in and around the provincial capital of Hassakeh city, which is further south.[31]

The PYD's Kurdish and Arab rivals tend to view this policy of non-aggression as evidence of a secret deal with Asad and many treat the Kurdish militias as part and parcel of the regime forces, fighting them and referring to PYD loyalists as *Shabiha*.[32] PYD leaders deny this and insist that they are a legitimate opposition group committed to toppling Bashar al-Asad, yet involuntarily locked in defensive warfare against factions backed by Turkey, radical jihadis and other Sunni Arab opposition groups.[33]

In the Qamishli area, both anti-Asad rebel groups and pro-Asad paramilitary forces recruit primarily from Sunni Arab tribes that have historically had a tense relationship with local Kurds. These include the Tai, a Sunni Arab tribe which is present in both Iraq and Syria and which has provided manpower for a pro-Asad militia unit in Qamishli city, led by the tribal figure Mohammed

Fares. Arab families who had settled on land confiscated from the Kurds by the Ba'ath Party in the early 1970s now fear expulsion, and also support the government. However, some of these settler populations appear to perceive the Islamist rebels as more reliable protectors of their interests.[34]

In addition, the government retains favour among many Christians in Hassakeh province, although this community's support is also courted by the PYD. A small secular Syriac–Christian group called the Syriac Union Party has organised an urban militia in Hassakeh province called the Sutoro, as well as a small paramilitary wing called the Syriac Military Council. Both organisations are largely co-opted into the PYD-backed Kurdish political structures, but one branch of the Sutoro militia in Qamishli city is instead affiliated with government supporters, emerging as a pro-Asad militia and labelled *Shabiha* by regime opponents.[35]

As should be evident from the tangled situation in Hassakeh province, which is mirrored by equally complex local configurations in other provinces, the Syrian government's militia recruitment strategy is far more sophisticated and opportunistic than merely relying on Alawis and non-Sunni minorities. Other groups that fear an opposition victory or need protection against local rivals have also turned to the government, and while religious minorities such as the Alawis and Shi'a are over-represented compared to their percentage of the national population, the composition of militia forces in a given area of Syria will always depend on the local ethno-sectarian and political environment.

Indeed, as in Hassakeh, there are many areas where Sunni Arab fighters seem to have ended up on the government side because of tribal politics. Despite the Ba'ath Party's anti-tribal ideology, both Hafez and Bashar al-Asad worked assiduously to co-opt tribal figures by offering them government positions and economic opportunities. Many soldiers were recruited from Sunni Arab tribes and institutions, such as the parliament and the cabinet which would typically include representatives of key tribal groups. A current example is the Minister of Defence, General Fahd Jassim al-Freij, who hails from the Hama region and is a member of the Hadidiyin, a powerful tribe with 'historically strong' ties to the Asad regime and the Alawi community.[36]

In Aleppo, the intelligence apparatus had long-standing links to the Berri, a Sunni Arab tribal group centred in the Bab al-Neirab neighbourhood. One member, Hassan Berri, was elected to the Syrian parliament, while his brother Ali Zeineddine Berri reportedly ran an organised crime ring in Aleppo, protected by government intelligence contacts. In 2011, Ali Zeineddine Berri and his clansmen helped suppress demonstrations in Aleppo and fight off rebel

incursions, until opposition factions finally invaded the Berri clan's Bab al-Neirab stronghold in July 2012. Hassan Berri was reportedly wounded in the fighting and Ali Zeineddine and several of his associates in the 'Berri Shabiha' were executed.[37]

Another source of cross-sectarian support for the regime has been the Ba'ath Party. By 2011, the party had between two and three million members in Syria, drawn from all religious groups.[38] Many others were involved with one or more of the various Ba'ath-led 'mass organisations' and unions, such as the General Peasants' Union, the Ba'ath Pioneers, the Revolutionary Youth Union, the General Women's Union, the National Union of Syrian Students and the General Federation of Trade Unions. Party members are tied to the government by an array of privileges and, of course, by the fear of what a rebel takeover might mean for them and their families. While many Ba'athists defected to the opposition, particularly when the regime seemed to be approaching collapse in 2011–12, others have fought hard to preserve the current political system. Many Ba'athist cadres deemed loyal to the regime were reportedly armed as part of the militia-building strategy.[39]

Proto-militias: The Popular Committees

In the first weeks of the uprising, pro-government Syrians began volunteering for service in the so-called Popular Committees (*lijan sha'biya*), initially conceived of as a type of neighbourhood watch organisation. These groups were highly visible throughout Syria—they were even mentioned by Asad in a speech at Damascus University in June 2011, where he referred to the Popular Committee members as 'young people who confronted dangers'—and yet they were hardly noticed by the international media except in the form of muddled reports about 'the Shabiha militia'.[40]

The Popular Committees were a first attempt to empower and channel pro-Asad militants into a structured framework. In areas where the regime lacked a solid popular base, the Popular Committees were probably dependent on state intervention, but in regions where local pro-regime communities felt threatened by the revolutionary movement, vigilante-style Popular Committees appear to have formed spontaneously and in a disorganised fashion. In April 2011, the police in the Homs province—where sectarian and political polarisation was particularly acute—felt compelled to try to ban the creation of Popular Committees 'to protect safety and the public interest'.[41]

Members of a Popular Committee were expected to act as the eyes and ears of the intelligence apparatus in their local community, to organise demonstra-

tions in support of the government whenever needed, and to lock down territory by manning checkpoints and conducting night patrols. In time, they were also increasingly used to chase down and attack opposition figures. Most Popular Committees appear to have started out poorly armed or unarmed, with no real organisation or training. Supported and led by the intelligence services, they seem to have consisted of unemployed young men whose loyalty was guaranteed by privileged access to state resources and salaries paid by wealthy regime supporters.[42] Although nominally organised under the auspices of the National Security Office, a government overseeing body for the intelligence apparatus, many of these groups soon gained a reputation for undisciplined conduct and abusing their powers.[43]

In Homs, the intelligence services gathered young men from the mostly pro-government Alawi neighbourhoods. They were organised into Popular Committees, given arms and paid a monthly salary from the al-Bustan charity fund, which is controlled by Rami Makhlouf, a wealthy businessman and cousin of President Asad. As the fighting increased in Homs in spring 2012, the Popular Committees—now referred to by both the opposition and by some of their own members as *Shabiha*—were able to recruit more members and provide them with heavier arms. In this way, they grew into powerful local militias.[44]

The National Defence Forces (NDF)

In 2012, the regime began reorganising many of the Popular Committees and other militias that had emerged during the conflict.[45] This resulted in the creation of the National Defence Forces (*quwat al-difa' al-watani*), a new umbrella structure for 'local citizens fighting alongside the army to defend their communities and regions', as Asad put it in mid-2013.[46] With time, the NDF emerged as a very significant part of the government's military apparatus, taking up front-line roles and sometimes operating heavy weapons, tanks and rocket artillery. The government of Iran appears to have been heavily involved with the creation of the NDF, providing financial and material support as well as training. In September 2012, the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, Major-General Mohammed Ali Jaafari, said that more than 50,000 Syrians had been 'organised as a people's army, or a force of Syrian Basij'—an Iranian volunteer militia—to support Asad's army.[47]

Unlike the haphazardly organised Popular Committees, NDF fighters are supposed to wear a uniform (or at least identifying marks), although this seems to vary from region to region. Recruits receive a few weeks' basic military training, and there are also reports of specialist courses in Iran. Fighters

are provided a regular salary, allegedly around 15,000 Syrian pounds per month.[48] Some sources say that the NDF fusion was supervised by Brigadier-General Ghassan Nassour, an Alawi Republican Guard commander in good standing with the ruling family, but the movement appears to be highly decentralised.[49] Each Syrian province has its own NDF branch and its membership therefore reflects local demography. These branches are commanded by a local military officer, often at colonel (*'aqid*) or brigadier-general (*'amid*) rank; or by civilian leaders who rose through the Popular Committees or enjoy special connections to the ruling elite.[50]

Other paramilitary forces

The NDF is the biggest, but certainly not the only, organised paramilitary group in Syria, although most others are local militias. The second-largest may be the Ba'ath Battalions (*kataib al-ba'th*), which emerged after rebels moved into Aleppo in the summer of 2012. The group was organised by the local Ba'ath Party head, Hilal Hilal, who was subsequently moved to Damascus and promoted to deputy party leader.[51] Its fighters are Ba'ath Party members who have been given basic military training and are used to protect party facilities or relieve the Army.[52] In Aleppo, the Ba'ath Battalions gradually grew into a powerful faction, benefiting from a presidential decree that grants conscripts from Aleppo the right to perform military service in local pro-government militias.[53] While those fighters appear to be mainly Sunni Arabs—reflecting the demography of Aleppo—new branches of the Ba'ath Battalions were subsequently set up in Latakia, Tartus and Damascus, and it is possible that their religious composition is different.[54]

A much smaller yet interesting example of a pro-Asad paramilitary group is the leftist–nationalist militia known as the Syrian Resistance (*al-muqawama al-souriya*).[55] It fights mainly in the northern Latakia region under the leadership of Mihrac Ural (alias 'Ali Kayyali'), a Turkish-born Alawi and communist who has lived in Syria since the early 1980s.[56] While promoting a leftist–nationalist secular message in its online propaganda, Ural's group has attached itself to Alawi religious figures and now appears to function essentially as an Alawi militia.[57]

Shi'a fighters and other foreign-led militias

In addition to the various Syrian militia groups, thousands have travelled to Syria to fight on the government side. Most are Shi'a Muslims recruited by

religious parties in Iraq and Lebanon. The Iranian government appears to have played a major role in establishing these militias and in directing fighters to Syria.[58] Several pro-Iranian Iraqi Shi'a factions have sent fighters to Syria, including Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, the Hizballah Battalions, the Mahdi Army, and the Badr Organisation.[59] One of the first and largest Shi'a militias in Syria was the Abul-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, formed in Damascus in 2012 by Iraqi fighters from Asaib Ahl al-Haqq and other groups.[60] The Iraqi factions rarely use their own names when fighting in Syria. For example, the Badr Organisation set up a group in Syria called the Martyr Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr Forces, to which it claimed to have dispatched 1,500 Iraqi fighters by the summer of 2013.[61] These groups employ a religious narrative that focuses more on the defence of Syria's Shi'a population and holy sites than on saving the Asad regime.[62] In particular, much attention is given to the shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab, located in an area of southern Damascus that houses a large number of Iraqi and other Shi'a immigrants.

The Lebanese group Hizballah is a partial exception. Although overtly Shi'a–Islamist and pro-Iranian, much of its external propaganda has focused on the Arab–Islamic resistance against Israel and the United States, instead of being phrased in purely religious and sectarian terms. Hizballah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah justifies the group's intervention in Syria on the grounds that 'the Syrian and the Lebanese files are one' and that the 'existential threat' from *takfiris* (Sunni extremists) cannot be fought on one side of the border only.[63] Unlike most of the Iraqi groups, Hizballah also acts in Syria under its own name. While it seems to have provided some support to the Syrian government in 2011, Hizballah did not acknowledge a direct military presence in Syria until May 2013, when its forces helped the army reclaim the city of Quseir from Sunni rebels. Hizballah again took a leading role in the Qalamoun region north of Damascus in the spring of 2014, and it has fought in Damascus and other areas.[64]

While Shi'a Islamists make up the vast majority of pro-regime foreign fighters, a number of small secular groups based outside Syria in part or in whole have also aided Asad's forces. They include the Arab Nationalist Guards, formed in 2013 by Lebanese leftists and smaller numbers of Egyptians, Tunisians, Yemenis and others,[65] and the SSNP, which sent Lebanese cadres to fight alongside their fellow party members in Syria.[66]

Pro-regime Palestinian factions are essentially indigenous, as their fighters come from refugee families that have typically resided in Syria for two or three generations. Some Palestinians joined '*Shabiha*' networks and Popular

Committees in the early stages of the uprising. In Palestinian refugee camps, these groups were led or supported by government-backed Palestinian factions such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command (PFLP–GC), al-Sa'iqa, and Fath al-Intifada.[67] In late 2013, several armed groups from the Neirab and Handarat refugee camps in Aleppo were reorganised into a larger Palestinian militia called the Jerusalem Brigade, which has since played a significant role in supporting the Syrian Arab Army.[68]

A threat to central control?

The government's dependence on local militias is not unproblematic. Referring to the rise of the militia commanders, a Syrian government official told *Time Magazine* in September 2013: 'After this crisis, there will be one thousand more crises. Two years ago they went from nobody to somebody with guns and power. How can we tell these *Shabiha* to go back to being a nobody again?'[69]

While Asad remains the uncontested leader of the Syrian regime, he now relies heavily on local commanders whose interests do not always align perfectly with those of the central government. Some militias have been engaged in divisive local power struggles, political and sectarian radicalism, or criminal activity. Militia commanders are likely to become more ambitious as their influence grows and public order withers around them, and some may seek to increase their leverage vis-à-vis the central government by self-financing or seeking alternative sponsors. Already in 2012 militia groups in Homs were reportedly extorting money from wealthy Alawi families in order to finance their day-to-day activities and selling looted goods and services for profit.[70]

Some of the most powerful militias on the government side are linked to the Iranian government and/or to organisations based outside Syria, and may prioritise their own agenda over the interests of the Asad regime. This includes the Iraqi Shi'a foreign fighter contingents, many of which suddenly abandoned their positions in Syria when Sunni–Shi'a infighting exploded in Iraq in June 2014.[71] Iran presumably also exerts influence over some indigenous Syrian militias, particularly the small Iranian and Hizballah-trained Shi'a militias in places like Quseir and Bosra al-Sham. The NDF, too, appears to rely on Iranian support and training, although its fighters and leaders are Syrians. So far, the pro-Asad forces in Syria seem to work with a unity of purpose, despite their increasingly decentralised structure and diverse loyalties, but there is anecdotal evidence of internal conflicts on the regime side and of local militia fighters challenging state authorities.[72]

In the summer of 2013, armed demonstrations and clashes briefly erupted in the Druze-majority Damascene suburb of Jeremana, after the Republican Guard moved to arrest leaders of a local Popular Committee. Some accounts suggested a conflict over unpaid wages, but certain pro-opposition sources claimed that these leaders were mired in criminal activity and drifting away from their original counter-insurgency mission. According to one report, the Jeremana Popular Committee had fallen out of favour with the government to a newly formed NDF detachment, but each continued to be sponsored by different regime officials.[73]

In a more recent case, hawkish NDF militiamen in Homs reportedly tried to derail a government-approved local ceasefire plan in February 2014 by firing on a UN convoy, forcing Asad to dispatch a top intelligence commander to prevent disturbances.[74] When the government finally captured the old town of Homs in May 2014, pro-government militias briefly clashed. The conflict reportedly pitted fighters from the mainly Alawi Homs branch of the NDF against the mainly Christian SSNP, hinting at the potential for local sectarian conflict within the government camp.[75]

In the long run, the regime's strategy of delegating military responsibilities to self-made local commanders and inviting foreign-led militias onto Syrian soil may undermine central government control. One well-informed observer of the Syrian government claims that this process is already well under way and that in many areas of the country pro-government forces are held together more by a 'regime ethos' than by any institutional framework, as the regime struggles to monitor and coordinate the many local groups that are nominally loyal to Asad.[76]

Even so, during the first four years of conflict, there have been no credible reports of large-scale mutinies or infighting in the government camp. There may be a number of reasons for this. On the political side, regime control over the media prevents differences from being aired openly, and the authoritarian nature of the state and the symbolic centrality of Asad's leadership provide pro-regime fighters with a collective rallying point. Organisationally, the incorporation of many Popular Committees into the NDF is likely to have tightened central control over local commanders. The Syrian researcher Kheder Khaddour also points to the role of civilian institutions such as the Syrian Martyrs' Association, which provides social services to NDF fighters and their families, thereby 'further enmeshing civilians in state institutions'.[77]

In the final analysis, there is little doubt that the support granted to the Syrian Arab Army by local and foreign militias has helped stabilise the govern-

ment and turn the war in Asad's favour.[78] The government seems aware of the risks associated with this strategy and is taking steps to contain the disruptive effects of local militia proliferation. These efforts appear to have been successful so far, but to integrate civilian-led groups effectively into Asad's support base, the government must certainly give greater weight to the parochial interests and ideological or sectarian motivations of these groups, perhaps at the expense of a more judicious long-term national strategy. In addition, Asad's reliance on Iranian and other foreign support may constrain his political independence and risks opening up the ruling apparatus itself to foreign penetration and a loss of sovereignty.

11

ALAWIS IN THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION

Carsten Wieland

Opposition from within the Alawi community has always existed throughout the Asad dynasty. Given their domination of the security services and insider knowledge of the regime, they have therefore been among the dissenters most feared by the regime. Since they enjoy a prominent role within Syrian society, Alawi critics have often enjoyed high credibility among the opposition. They have also pointed to poverty, corruption and socio-economic grievances, which contradicts widespread assumptions that all Alawis have profited from the Asad regime. Alawi dissenters have always been dangerous to the regime, putting into question the ruling narrative that is built on the assumption that Alawis are loyal to the Asad dynasty. However, Alawis have not been able to construct an identity that separates their community from the regime.[1] Indeed, Alawis in the opposition lack a unified, community-wide leadership that represents them and communicates their grievances to the international community. This chapter explores the role of Alawis within the Syrian opposition, tracing elite figures and their key narratives. It argues that Alawi intellectuals have always been and continue to remain a crucial part of Syria's secular opposition, despite their reluctance to pursue a grassroots Alawi strat-

egy to challenge the regime's hegemonic control and discursive power over that community.

Suppression of the Moderates

It was not Islamist movements that the regime perceived as its main threat. Both Hafez al-Asad and his son Bashar, who succeeded him in 2000, at times capitalised on and even exploited the presence of a radical Sunni Islamist current in the country to create a common enemy for Syrians to unite against under the rubric of the Ba'athist state's nationalist and secular ideology. At the same time, they suppressed those within the minorities, especially Alawis, who dared to speak out against the regime.

Islamists were both jailed and released from prison when it served the domestic and regional interests of the regime. In the 1980s, in a bid to secure support from Saudi Arabia to consolidate his power, Hafez al-Asad opened the door to cultural and educational Wahhabism, allowing prominent Saudi sheikhs to set up Quranic schools, welfare organisations and mosques across Syria.[2] In return, Saudi Arabia pledged not to support the militant Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which posed a significant threat to the regime between 1976 and 1982. In 2003, after the allied invasion of Iraq, Bashar allowed Islamists to cross the border into Iraq and encouraged them to fight against the US troops who represented a threat to Syria's national interest. Some of the Islamists were let out of the notorious Sednaya prison for this purpose.[3] From mid-2011 onwards, Bashar again played the 'Islamist card', releasing key Islamists from Sednaya prison in an attempt to discredit the majority-Sunni opposition by adding radicals, violent extremists and criminals to its ranks, which consequently reinforced the regime's image as the sole guarantor of minority security and freedoms. Some of the Salafist personalities who were released from Sednaya became leading figures in Islamist rebel groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jeish al-Islam.'[4]

While Syrian Islamists have historically been co-opted and coerced by the regime, the more serious and sustained political opponents remain Syria's secular thinkers and activists, many of whom originate from the left, where Alawis were disproportionately strongly represented. These intellectual secularists represented a viable secular alternative to the Ba'ath regime. For this reason members of the Civil Society Movement—the traditional secular intellectual opposition in Syria prior to the upheaval—were continuously jailed although they had repeatedly reached out for compromise with the regime.

They had underlined the wish for a smooth transition, a 'soft landing' and gradual reforms. Many of them rejected blunt regime change rhetoric and criticised such endeavours from outside. Often, they shared traditional pan-Arab ideologies and harboured the same disgust for US foreign policies, particularly those pursued by George W. Bush.

There was a time when elements of the regime appeared to be seeking to capitalise on the moderate tone of the leftist opposition and exploit the fact that they were not explicitly calling for forcible regime change. In 2003, Bahjat Suleiman, the powerful and widely feared former head of Syrian intelligence and former Syrian ambassador to Jordan, wrote in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir*: 'In Syria, the regime does not have enemies but "opponents" whose demands do not go beyond certain political and economic reforms such as the end of the state of emergency and martial law; the adoption of a law on political parties; and the equitable redistribution of national wealth.'[5] Instead of reaching out to 'opponents' who sought a gradual transition toward civil society and pluralism, Bashar, who promised reform when he came to power, came down hard on leftist intellectuals in efforts to eliminate the credible alternative that they posed to his rule. Thus the 'moderate' Syrian opposition, which included a significant number of Alawis, became disillusioned with Asad and more hard-line in its opposition to his rule.

Suleiman's distinction between opponents and enemies became obsolete when Syria descended into violence. Even after the government's brutal repression of the popular protests in 2011, key opposition figures attempted to leave the door open to dialogue with Asad in a bid to avoid civil war. Most notably among them were writer and publisher Louay Hussein, an Alawi key figure in the Syrian Civil Society Movement, and Michel Kilo, a Christian writer and human rights activist, both of whom participated in the opposition conference in the Damascus Semiramis hotel in June 2011. Arguably, ignoring the 'constructive opposition' has been one of Asad's gravest errors.

An exchange of Alawi elites

Since its inception, the Ba'ath Party traditionally drew its popular support from Syria's politically disenfranchised, impoverished and socially marginalised communities. Under Hafez it increasingly broadened its social base.[6] Uprooted Alawis from the province of Alexandretta (the area around Iskanderun and Antakya ceded by France to Turkey in 1939) and Palestinian refugees—both the victims of imperialist policies—saw their political home

with the Ba'athists.[7] The Ba'ath Party also won support from those who held grievances against the traditional landed Sunni elite and young people from minority communities such as the Alawis, Druze and Isma'ilis. The latter were particularly attracted to the party, seeing in Ba'athism's radical pan-Arab ideology and social reform agenda an opportunity for further social mobility and integration with Syrian society.

After the Ba'ath Party came to power in 1963, great changes occurred within the Alawi community. Syria's traditional elites in politics, society, economy, culture and religion, traditionally drawn from educated and urban backgrounds, were gradually sidelined as the Ba'ath Party institutionalised Alawis of a lower social ranking and rural descent into the ranks of the military, civil service and *Mukhabarat*, which formed the backbone of the Asad state. Traditional religious Alawi notables were also sidelined, with appointments centrally controlled and conferred with the blessing of the president.[8] Hafez never received delegations of Alawite sheikhs; at least, no such gatherings have ever been documented.[9] Instead, he received sheikhs on an individual basis, playing one religious leader against another to secure their allegiance. The quid pro quo of Alawi social mobility under Ba'athism was the Alawi community's unconditional loyalty to the Asad regime. Under such circumstances, a person could become a religious leader (sheikh) not because of his intellectual credentials but because of his social and political standing in the Asad power structure. It became normal that a general could be considered a sheikh.

After Hafez crushed the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency, which started in 1976 and culminated in the 1982 Hama massacre, he turned his focus toward other sections of society opposing his rule. Numerous Alawi opposition figures engaged with leftist political parties, especially the Communist Action Party (1981–93), which refused to enter the pro-regime National Front[10] and thus acted from outside the legal Ba'athist framework, were imprisoned with longer sentences than opposition personalities from other religious backgrounds. Thus gradually, much of the traditional Alawi opposition faded away. Their offspring were more interested in participating in economic development and had little interest in getting involved in politics. When Bashar came to power an Alawi intelligentsia emerged that opposed the regime and it participated in the Damascus Spring in 2000–2001. In September 2000, the Syrian Civil Society Movement's first important declaration was the 'Manifesto of the 99', to which one third of the signatories were Alawi.[11] Before the regime crushed the movement in February 2001, a 'Manifesto of 1,000' was published and debat-

ing clubs sprang up in private houses all over Damascus. The most eminent of this grouping was Aref Dalila, Dean of the Faculty of Economics in Damascus University and onetime economic advisor to Hafez. Of the ten leading activists imprisoned at the end of the Damascus Spring, Dalila received the lengthiest sentence. In calling for democracy and transparency to fight corruption, and criticising Syria's economic system in a lecture, the professor had crossed a red line.[12] Another key Alawi figure was the novelist and critic Nabil Suleiman, who organised the civil society committees from Latakia.

The regime's core support base began to contract around an Alawi clique. Except for political veteran and Vice President Faruq al-Shara' all key figures in politics, the intelligence, and the military were replaced by Alawis. Without having had the courage to risk a popular vote, which may have broadened his power base, he now had nothing much left but his clan and the security apparatus to fall back on. This marked a radical departure from the reign of Hafez, whose regime was dependent upon the meticulous co-option of non-Alawi segments of society.[13] Under Hafez the Ba'ath Party was not an Alawi party and its base was formed from various social rather than religious groupings. Indeed, most Alawis did not fare any better than members of Syria's other communities.[14] Since Bashar's succession, not only did a gap emerge between the Asad-Alawites and the majority Sunni population and dissenters from other religious denominations, but significantly for the Asad regime, a widening gulf developed between Asad-Alawis and non-Asad-Alawis, which narrowed the regime's support base.

As the regime contracted and suppressed dissent, Alawis participated in attempts to form a cohesive and operative clandestine opposition. On 1 January 2007, Alawi intellectuals were present at the apartment of Sunni businessman Riad Seif, a Damascus Spring leader and former member of parliament. During a nineteen-hour meeting, Sunni, Alawi and Christian opposition members established the National Council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change. In Alawi circles, the formation of organised Alawi opposition parties was discussed—encouraged by the recommendations of the Tenth Party Congress in 2005 and a new party law in the constitution of 2012 which theoretically ended the predominance of the Ba'ath Party—but no parties of specific religious and ethnic background were ultimately allowed. The idea of an exclusive or majority-Alawi opposition party posed a considerable threat to the regime. No such party has ever emerged and this is in part due to the fact that Alawis in the opposition fear disproportionate retribution for taking an anti-regime stance; and, perhaps more significantly, they articu-

late their views in secular and ideological terms rather than from a religious or ethno-religious perspective.

The Alawite opposition narrative

Never having primarily defined themselves in primordial terms of origin or religion, Alawis have been easily appropriated in political terms by the dynastic project of Asad. Blurring the lines between Asad and the broader Alawi community has rendered their separation virtually impossible. This contributed to the success and resilience of the regime. A separation of regime and government seemed unthinkable for most Syrians, especially for those who remain in the Asad camp be it out of conviction or fear. This left Alawis in the opposition in an unenviable predicament: viewed with fear and suspicion by the Sunni majority for their 'privileged' position, yet ruthlessly pursued as treacherous conspirators by the regime. One Alawi dissident who is openly critical of the regime is Habib Abu Zarr (pseudonym). He published a lengthy article, in September 2013, in the German magazine *Zenith*, summarising many of the arguments that Alawis in the opposition have raised against Asad. In this article, arguing that the Alawi community is hostage to the regime, he commented: 'Rarely has a ruler managed to suppress his own religious community in such a way and, at the same time, ensured that they have thanked him on their knees.'[15] Asad defined and used 'his Alawis' and reinvented himself as the 'Messiah of a hated minority, their creator of identity, their provider and *raison d'être*.' He promoted the bestialisation of society, the loss of values, bonds and ideals, so that his brutal dictatorship became acceptable. 'It is not the power of the military and the secret service that are the real guarantors for the rule of the house of Asad but the nebulous identity of the Alawis, their internal insecurities and the hatred of the Sunni majority.'[16]

Abu Zarr indicates that this nebulous identity has blurred the lines of definition and ascription, stating that: 'In reality, Alawis are the result of a relatively recent development.'[17] For Abu Zarr, the contemporary political narrative of Alawi homogeneity seeks to obscure and paper over Alawi migration from Iraq and integration with local Syrian tribes, which consequently resulted in long-lasting rivalries between Alawi tribes, the largest of which are the Haddadin, the Khayyatin, the Matawira and the Kalbiyin, which the Asad family joined. Abu Zarr goes further, asserting that 'the Asad dynasty is of very recent Alawi ascription, which puts in question the Asads' real "Alawiteness"'.[18] He argues that until some sixty years ago, Asad's ancestors were known

as '*al-Wahsh*', meaning fierce or wild, and the surname *Asad*, meaning lion, is a recent addition. Both *al-Wahsh* and *al-Asad* are untypical names for Alawis who, unlike Sunnis, do not often name their families according to particular characteristics or animals.[19] While not all of Abu Zarr's claims are historically verifiable, it is interesting that as an Alawi opposition figure he has sought to undermine the ethno-religious credibility of the Asad dynasty. In the absence of alternative Alawi religious narratives or leaders challenging Asad's communal guardianship, history became a significant tool for the legitimisation and de-legitimisation of modern Syrian political narratives.

Alawis and the Syrian uprising

In the early weeks and months of the Syrian uprising, people from all social and religious backgrounds took to the streets echoing the demands of Arab Spring protests in Tunisia, Libya and, above all, Egypt. Demonstrations against the regime's corrupt functionaries started in Dar'a, spreading across the country to Jisr al-Shughour near the Turkish border in the north, Baniyas and Latakia on the Mediterranean coast, Deir al-Zour in the eastern desert, and the major industrial cities of Homs and Hama. Interestingly, timid demonstrations actually occurred in Damascus in February and March 2011 before the first deaths were reported in Dar'a. When the regime employed a 'security solution' to crush the peaceful protests, demonstrations became directed against Asad himself, as opposed to the lower-ranking institutions which were the target of the initial gatherings.

During the early months of the uprising, the movement explicitly rejected sectarianism, and so did its various organisations, including the Syrian National Council (SNC).[20] Alawis mingled within the crowds, held banners and chanted slogans in favour of freedom and reform, some even travelling from city to city to join protests,[21] which surprised opposition activists from other communal backgrounds. At this time, most of the protest slogans emphasised the unity and patriotism of the Syrian people. In Hariqa (Damascus) in February 2011, and subsequently in several demonstrations thereafter, protesters stressed unity in diversity with chants of 'Not Sunni nor Alawi, we want freedom' (*la Sunniyya wa la 'Alawiyya, bidna huriyya*), and 'Syria in all its shades and sects' (*Suriyya bijami' atyafiha wa tawa'ifha*).

On 25 April 2011, Syrian intellectuals expressed their outrage over the violence with a declaration signed by 102 writers from all backgrounds, mourning 'the martyrs of the uprising' and condemning 'the violent, oppres-

sive practices of the Syrian regime against the protesters'. Signatories included Alawi figures such as Louay Hussein, female writers Samar Yazbek and Hala Mohammad, pan-Arab daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat* correspondent Souad Jarrous, writer and former political prisoner Yassin al-Haj Saleh and film-maker Mohammad Ali al-Attassi. Mansour al-Ali, a prominent Alawi figure from the city of Homs, was arrested in his home city after he spoke out against the shooting of protesters.[22]

Syrian society began to segregate when peaceful protests were met with escalating violence by the regime. On the popular level, the Alawi community felt threatened in that it had the most to lose from regime change and the most to fear from a Sunni backlash. On the other hand, the violence did produce some instances of inter-religious solidarity. Courageously, however, some Alawi tribal leaders publicly distanced themselves from the Asad regime. An example of Alawi dissent came from the coastal region where the 'Alawite League of Coordinating Committees and Figures on the Syrian Coast' was established at the end of 2011, declaring that the 'Alawi community was not responsible for barbaric acts being committed against the demonstrators'.[23] The statement emphasised that *Shabiha* militias were 'toys in the hands of the Asad family' and that they had no connection to the Alawi community. The authors equated Maher al-Asad's brutal elite forces to the militias led by Bashar's uncle Rifaat in the 1970s which participated in the Hama massacre. The text reads: 'Throughout the history of this homeland [Syria], the Alawites—like the Druze, the Sunnis, the Shi'as, the Kurds, the Christians, and all the components of the Syrian people—have constituted the existence of this homeland, its emergence, and its unity. Throughout the history of the Syrian people, no sect has excluded or unjustly treated another sect.'[24]

The text emphasised the active participation of the Alawi community in Syria's revolutionary history, including resistance to the French colonial influence and the founding of nationalist, leftist and pan-Arab parties and movements. The authors, who remained in hiding and are unknown even to Alawis in the opposition until today,[25] explicitly mentioned the active role of Alawis in the Arab Socialist Movement of Akram al-Howrani, a pan-Arab Sunni and one of the founders of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. The declaration stressed the nationalist credentials of contemporary Alawis who 'stood by their duties to liberate the Golan and carried the values of the entire democratic march of transformation'.[26] This powerful critique demonstrated how at times the Alawi opposition utilised the rhetoric of pan-Arab and greater-Syrian legacies that were tied to the national struggle for independence.[27] In contrast, pro-regime

Alawis and many of those who simply feared for their lives sold property in the plains of places such as Homs and withdrew to the Alawi mountains in case the Alawi sect would have to defend its last bastion, which is reminiscent of sectarian state-building under the French mandate.

Another critical Alawi voice was the pro-revolutionary journalist and human rights lawyer Mazen Darwish, who is married to Yara Badr. In 2004, Darwish founded the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (CMFE), a partner organisation of Reporters without Borders which named him reporter of the year in 2012. Unlicensed by the Syrian government and consistently lobbying for liberal press laws, working underground Darwish was one of the most important sources for foreign media correspondents who could not enter Syria. He was arrested for the first time in 2008 when he and a colleague reported on a prisoners' revolt in Adra, close to Damascus, but was released after just ten days' detention. Darwish was not so lucky on 16 February 2012, when he and several colleagues were taken away by security forces after reporting human rights violations, and he has been imprisoned ever since.[28]

Another well-known Alawite personality during the first year of the revolution is the Aleppo-born actress Fadwa Suleiman, who played a crucial role during the Homs demonstrations in 2011. Like many other Alawis in the opposition she rejected sectarian categorisation, writing on her Facebook page in December 2011 'Down with the Alawites and long live their humanity... Down with the Sunnis, Druze, Ismailis, Muslims, Jews and Christians, and long live their humanity... Long live humanity in dignity everywhere, of whatever religion or affiliation.' Elsewhere she said: 'The regime portrays Homs as a hub for extreme Islam, but I walk in Sunni neighbourhoods distributing flyers, and go...without a veil, into the homes of religious families and discuss politics and organising the next protest.'[29] A YouTube video showed Suleiman standing on a podium, in December 2011, in the Sunni neighbourhood of Khalidiya in Homs, chanting 'One, One, One. Syrian People are One!'[30] When life in Syria became too dangerous for her and the activists shielding her, she was forced to flee the country. The majority of pro-regime Alawis disavowed her and her brother Mahmoud appeared on state-owned television arguing that Syria's unity was more important than his sister.[31]

From the outset of the crisis, part of the regime's survival strategy was to portray the upheaval as a) violent and b) a radical Sunni insurgency. Moderate critics, be they secular voices or Muslim clerics, were swiftly silenced. Prominent Damascene preacher Mouaz al-Khatib, who was considered by many as an enlightened religious figure who headed the independent Islamic Civilisa-

tion Society, was taken away by the *Mukhabarat*. With opposition figures Aref Dalila and Michel Kilo at his side, he told protesters shortly before his arrest: 'We call for freedom for every person. For every Sunni, Alawi, Isma'ili and Christian, whether Arab or a member of the great Kurdish nation.'[32]

Prominent Alawi opposition figures, although clearly in the minority, were particularly irksome to the regime's propaganda machine. Opposition figures claimed that the regime's fear that the Alawis in the opposition could subvert Asad's sectarian civil war narrative contributed to its willingness to perpetrate deliberate massacres, such as the killings at the Clock Tower Square in Homs—dubbed 'Tahrir Square' by activists—on 18 April 2011. On this fateful night, tens of thousands gathered to create a focal point for Syria's revolution, including local and other Alawis, and the security forces opened fire, killing dozens of civilians. A similar massacre occurred at the al-Asi Square in Hama, on 4 July 2011, where hundreds of thousands of people gathered—mostly Sunni, but from all backgrounds—chanting refrains of the Sunni singer Ibrahim Qashoush. When Christian Hama police chief Mahmoud Saoudi refused the government's order to open fire on the peaceful protesters, he was immediately dismissed. Other armed units were transferred into the city and live rounds of ammunition were then fired into the crowds leading to multiple deaths.[33]

In the following months, as the resistance morphed into an armed insurgency, its external image became more and more Sunni in character. With increasing brutality, especially after government troops flattened the Homs suburb of Bab Amr in February 2012, it was above all Alawis (and to a lesser extent Christians, Druze and Isma'ilis) who felt exposed and feared retaliation, while many no longer identified with the direction that the uprising was taking. For many Alawis from the coastal mountains who were initially critical of the regime, the balance was tipped against the Syrian opposition on 4 August 2013, when Islamist rebels killed over 190 civilians and seized over 200 hostages during a military offensive south of Slunfeh in the rural Latakia governorate. According to Human Rights Watch, at least 67 of the victims were executed or unlawfully killed in an operation around Alawi villages.[34] For many Alawites as well as for many people of other backgrounds, the revolution had disfigured into a multi-front armed conflict with a sectarian appearance.

There were two dominant and competing narratives within the Alawi community concerning who was responsible for the radicalisation and escalation of violence. One view maintained that the regime was holding the Alawi community hostage, having incited sectarian hatred as part of its survival strategy.

A second equally popular explanation argued that Islamist terrorists who had been waiting for a ripe moment to take revenge against the Alawi community for its role in the Hama massacre sought to take over the state. At this point, a number of Alawi opposition figures retreated from their previous positions and began supporting the regime. These were mainly Alawi leftists, among them Fateh Jamous, long-time leader of the Communist Labour Party, who had served several prison sentences during 1982–2000 and 2003–6. In May 2012, during the elections under the new constitution, Jamous declared that the opposition's aim should not be to overthrow the regime but to pave the way for a peaceful transition. He rejected the Syrian opposition that was forming abroad and went on to act as Secretary General of the Peaceful Change Path Party,[35] within the so-called 'official' opposition which the regime publically accepted, albeit on its own terms.[36] Another opposition figure who distanced himself from the revolution was the novelist Nabil Suleiman who, during the Damascus Spring, was attacked and injured by security agents.

Between oppositions: Alawi personalities and currents

Alawis who continue to hold anti-regime views remain cautiously active inside Syria and cannot be named within this text. So precarious is their situation, they are probably not even known to fellow Alawis. A number of individuals and loose Alawi groupings do however comment on blogs, Facebook discussions, at opposition conferences and in the regular media, such as actress Fadwa Suleiman and Mazen Darwish. Suleiman still supports the uprising from Paris, although she has expressed concern over the growing sectarian nature of the conflict. Other Alawi figures have made efforts to create a centre ground between the regime and the mainstream political opposition. One famous representative of this current is Louay Hussein. An outspoken critic of the Asad regime in earlier and less polarised times, he was one of the organisers of the first major Civil Society Movement conference, held in Damascus on 27 June 2011. He took part in the early demonstrations but soon distanced himself from the opposition, especially when the conflict escalated militarily, holding neither the regime nor any opposition group acting from outside the country as legitimate actors in a future Syria. Remaining in Damascus, Hussein faced criticism from opposition members for being a member of the 'soft opposition',[37] which can move within strict limits and even travel abroad. Since September 2011, as a Marxist and former member of the Communist Action Party (CAP), Hussein led the organisation 'Building the Syrian State'

(*Tayyar Bina al-Dawla al-Souriya*) which remained critical of the militarisation of the opposition as well as of any kind of international intervention. Therefore it was all the more surprising that Hussein left as a key representative of the 'internal opposition' and fled to Turkey in February 2015, after he had been arrested in November 2014 and subsequently released on bail. Since the 'elections' in Damascus in June 2014 he had sharpened his criticism of Asad's government. After his escape he made an interesting statement that the Syrian regime had fragmented into militias, and therefore it had become impossible to find a negotiating-partner for the opposition.[38]

Other moderate opposition figures are found in the National Coordination Bureau for the Forces of Democratic Change (NCB) led by the Nasserist lawyer Hassan Abdelazim in Damascus. The NCB was composed of leftist–nationalist groups and Kurdish parties of which only the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has remained—Syria's branch of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey. Initially, the NCB comprised leftist–liberal figures that gradually drifted toward the more staunch opponents of the Asad regime like Bourhan Ghalioun or Michel Kilo, who joined the opposition abroad. Considered a fig leaf for the regime, the NCB was not recognised by the major protest movements within Syria—the Syrian Revolution General Commission, the Local Coordination Committees of Syria or the Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution. While most NCB members like its President Hassan Abdelazim remained in Damascus, with rising risks, at least until the beginning of 2015, some of its founders were forced underground, such as Alawi human rights lawyer Habib Issa, who was arrested after the regime's crackdown in 2001. An Arab nationalist, Issa was the spokesperson of the famous *Jamal al-Atasi* forum, a relic of the Damascus Spring debating clubs that went underground and online in 2005.[39]

Other high-profile Alawis found a political home in the NCB, such as Aref Dalila and Abdelaziz al-Khayyer. Dalila fled to Dubai and Khayyer was arrested on 20 September 2012, after returning from a political visit to China in preparation for a 'national dialogue' conference of the NCB in Damascus. Khayyer, a leading member of the Communist Action Party who had served a prison term of some twelve years (1993–2005), has not been heard of since. Khayyer's arrest, however, should perhaps be understood in a broader context. After a common struggle in the early years of Ba'athism, the Khayyer and Asad families shared a long history of confrontation, dating back to the execution of the Ba'athist poet Hassan al-Khayyer in 1979, which continued with the long imprisonment and torture of Abdelaziz al-Khayyer's wife Mona. Khayyer's

arrest at Damascus airport happened a few days before an open fight erupted between rival Alawi families in Hafez al-Asad's birth town of Qurdaha, on 29 September 2012. A member of the Khayyer family allegedly criticised the president's handling of the crisis and demanded his departure, which led to a shoot-out between the families. During this confrontation, the equally respected and influential Abboud and Othman families sided with the Khayyers. A Facebook entry of the Alawi opposition group 'Coordination of Qurdaha' indicates that Mohammed Asad did not survive the gun fight.[40]

Other reports of intra-Alawi conflicts have surfaced. For example, in March 2013, after the Grand Mufti of Damascus, Sheikh Hassoun, called for a *jihad* against the mostly Sunni rebels, a group of Alawite sheikhs called for a ceasefire on both sides. Subsequently, infighting was reported in Qurdaha, leaving a number of people killed. The conflict stemmed from the refusal of some Alawi families to send their sons to the front lines and clear Alawi discontent over the deteriorating conditions in Syria. The London-based Arab daily *al-Hayat* expanded on the incident:

> The regime…does not care about the double price the Alawite sect will pay because they got involved, more than any other group, in this huge amount of bloodshed…. The call by Alawite clerics with its 10 points, although ambiguous, is a clear indicator of the willingness of the sect to break away from the al-Asad family in exchange for guarantees of protection. Therefore, is there a revolution willing to respond?[41]

When Islamist groups started to encroach on the peripheries of the Latakia area, Alawi criticism of the regime diminished and, to date, no openly anti-Asad Alawi opposition movement has formed in the heartlands of the regime', except from several daring individual and anonymous protest photos uploaded on the Internet and Facebook initiatives.

As mentioned, among the groupings in Syria with strong traditional Alawi membership is the Communist Action Party (CAP). CAP was formed in 2004 but it originates from a Marxist group that operated between 1981 and 1993. The original group never joined the National Democratic Assembly; the re-established group, however, became a member in 2006.[42] Some of the traditional members of CAP, like Louay Hussein, founded organisations of their own. Other Alawi personalities, such as journalist and long-time prisoner Anwar Badr and the politician Bassam Yousef, left CAP and turned toward the liberal centre and mainstream opposition. Both Badr and Yousef are now members of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) which was recognised as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by some 130 countries in December 2012.

Other Alawi SOC members include the Syrian–Canadian Tawfiq Dunia, who was also on the executive board of the Syrian National Council (SNC) as a member of the National Bloc;[43] the film director and member of the Together Movement (*Harakat Ma'an*), Thaer Mousa, who was later elected to the executive committee of the Union of Syrian Democrats (USD) founded in Istanbul in September 2013; and long-time prisoner Malek Asaad from the Together Movement. The official SOC representative in France is the oil engineer and expatriate Monzer Makhous, also an Alawi. Further Alawi personalities within the anti-regime opposition who live abroad include the film director and Damascus Spring figure Osama Muhammad, member of the liberal National Change Current (NCC) of Ammar Qurabi; and the London-based Alawi regime defector Wahid Saqr, who was also an SNC council member.[44]

A number of Alawi women became high-profile opposition figures, such as human rights activist and writer Khawla Dunia (sister of Tawfiq Dunia and wife of the renowned medical activist Jalal Nofal),[45] writer Rosa Hassan, novelist Samar Yazbek, poet Rasha Omran and human rights lawyer Mona Asaad. In a particularly strong message to her community and civil servants in general, Lama Ahmad Iskandar was the first and so far the only Alawi diplomat to defect from the Syrian Foreign Ministry, fleeing to Germany in June 2013. The former second secretary at the Syrian Consulate in Dubai called on her ex-colleagues to break ranks and support the revolution in Syria with 'all possible means'. Appealing to the conscience of civil servants in non-religious terms, Iskandar did not define herself as part of the Alawi community or call exclusively upon her community to follow her example. In her defection statement, Iskandar described the Syrian government as a 'mafia regime' that ruled through a 'dynastic system of corruption, security state and repressive mentality'.[46] Condemning the security approach employed by the regime, she said: 'We are killed in the streets; our homes today have become ruins; our children today have become afraid of the colour of the sky. There is no difference between us, child or armed person, family or a gathering of opponents as we are victims of all kinds of terrorism by the Asad machine.'[47] Lama Ahmad Iskandar is the daughter of Ahmed Iskandar, former Information Minister (1973–83) and member of the regional leadership of the Ba'ath Party (1978–83), and her influential family swiftly disavowed her.

The highest ranking Alawi defector so far is former Defence Minister Ali Habib. Born in 1939 in Safita, the heartland of the Alawi mountains near Tartus, Habib served under Asad from 2009 until August 2011. The official explanation for his departure is that he had been replaced for 'health reasons',

but apparently Habib was put under house arrest because he disagreed with the uncompromising violence used by the regime to counter protests that, at the time, were largely peaceful. In September 2013, opposition members and defectors reported to *Reuters* that Habib had escaped to Turkey. Habib has since kept a low profile and not aligned with the opposition. Some opposition members view Habib as a credible alternative to Asad who could one day serve the US and Russia as a compromise figure.[48]

Another unique Alawi dissenter is Hafez al-Asad's brother Rifaat, the former vice president and head of Syria's infamous Defence Companies (*al-Saraya al-Difa'*). Rifaat had strong Alawi backing and was instrumental in the Hama massacre, spearheading the struggle against Syrian Islamists in the 1970s and 1980s. Having failed to seize power in an attempted *coup* in 1983–4, he was exiled and lives between Paris and London. Rifaat believed that he would have made a better and more natural successor to Hafez than the young and inexperienced eye-doctor Bashar. In exile, he was said to hold a group of sympathisers in the coastal town of Baniyas, where protests erupted in the first weeks of the revolt. Rifaat funds several smaller political parties (gathered in the United National Assembly), a satellite TV station (the Arab News Network, ANN), and several other front groups, most of them directed by his sons and employees. He also enjoys strong ties to Saudi Arabia, and is related through marriage to the late King Abdullah.[49]

Opposition figures claim that Rifaat has visited Syria since the uprising. In November 2011, he appeared on international TV and radio stations from Paris with a small group of allies known as the National Democratic Council, calling for a new president from within the ranks of the Asad family.[50] Despite Rifaat's unique connection to the inner core of the Asad dynasty, he has remained an isolated figure, distrusted by Bashar's Alawi supporters and critics alike.

In the digital sphere, Alawis have been very active in discussing their views in closed Facebook groups. One of the leading hosts of these discussion groups was Ali Dayoub, who lives in the Netherlands. At the end of 2013, Dayoub coordinated a large group among some sixty Alawi figures inside Syria and abroad, which discussed controversial issues of identity and strategy. According to Dayoub, Alawis have not found a home in the National Coalition or the mainstream opposition in general as: 'The opposition has shied away from speaking about the Alawite and sectarian issue that is opening up in front of them.... They have not openly welcomed Alawis and have found no common position towards minorities.' There are Alawi individuals inside the SOC, but other Alawis who were asked to join refused, such as Dayoub, who said: 'I didn't want to be an

Alawite decoration.'[51] He contends that 'the Alawites are not a community. They are many communities', but believes that a *coup d'état* is almost impossible due to the fear that binds the regime together. Dayoub concludes that Alawis should not play any political role in Syria any more, at least not in the near future; rather they should opine and become an important voice without entering politics as they have done enough damage for now.[52]

Alawis and armed resistance

While some Alawis in the opposition have chosen to engage in political activism, others have taken a more militant stance, entering into direct armed conflict with the regime. In this struggle Alawis have not striven to form exclusive Alawi units, rather preferring to pursue a more inclusive, secular path, much as they have done in the political realm. The most significant formation in this regard are the National Unity Battalions (*Kataeb al-Wehda al-Wataniya*, or KWW), a coalition of battalions and brigades with a clear secular and anti-sectarian leaning. This coalition was created in August 2012 along with a political branch, the National Unity Movement (*Tayyar al-Wehda al Wataniya*). Activists and intellectuals close to this movement gathered in the spring of 2013 under the name 'We Are All Syrians' (*Kuluna Sooriyoon*). The movement was initiated by opposition figures from the Alawi community and attracted prominent liberal democratic figures from all communities. The political branch of *Kuluna Sooriyoon* is based on democratic principles, with an emphasis on the protection of diversity. It promotes social reconciliation and negotiates truces between villages from different religious communities, the liberation of prisoners from both sides, assistance to defecting army soldiers, as well as relief work in mixed areas.

According to estimates from the Arab Reform Initiative, by the end of 2013 the number of armed fighters in the KWW was 2,000. Their main strongholds were in Jisr a Shughur (western Idlib)—which in 2015 became a stronghold of al-Nusra—and the southern neighbourhoods of Damascus. They also had a significant presence in Jabal al-Zawiya (Idlib province) and smaller units operated in Dar'a and Deir Az-Zour. The KWW brigades are often multi-sectarian, particularly in sensitive areas such as the Latakia countryside. Two brigades operated in Salamiya (Hama countryside), containing Isma'ili fighters. As of September 2013, in al-Jabal al-Wastani and Sahl al-Rouj (western Idlib), the KWW were the strongest force on the ground, despite the presence of some radical elements in nearby fronts.[53] In western Idlib and northern

Latakia, despite pressure and threats from *shari'a* courts, the KWW cooperated with defecting judges to open civil courts implementing Syrian civil and criminal law, and at least two civil courts have operated since July 2013 in these areas. The KWW recognised the Supreme Military Council (SMC) which was linked to the political authority of the SOC. The KWW also participated in the formation of the Free Front of Syria (Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya, or JAS), a secular-oriented coalition under the umbrella of the SMC. Since then, military alignments have been in a flux, and so has been the fate of the few Alawi military actors in the opposition.

Alawi opposition conferences and future consensus

The first Alawi opposition conference was officially held in Cairo, on 23 March 2013. Most participating Alawis resided outside Syria, drawing criticism from internal Alawi figures such as Louay Hussein. Although ten Alawi activists from inside Syria who attempted to attend the conference were prevented from travelling, a further seven did join the hundred delegates at the meeting.[54] The conference aimed to reaffirm the Alawi opposition's commitment to national unity and inter-communal coexistence, mirroring the stance that many Alawi leaders took during French colonial rule in the 1920s in opposition to proposals to partition the country. Thus the Cairo conference reiterated the stance of early Alawi coastal opposition groups inside Syria. Bassam Yousef, one of the main organisers, said in an interview: 'We are inviting all of the opposition to confront the sectarian problem being ignited by the regime. The last card the regime can now play is civil war and the partition of Syria.'[55]

The delegates discussed the regime's tactic of fuelling sectarianism and, noticeably, some feared that Alawis would pay a collective price if they did not dispel the myth that their community was a monolithic block standing firmly behind the Asad regime. When the participants met in Cairo, the death toll in Syria was approximately 70,000. That figure had practically doubled by the end of that year, fuelling fears of rising Sunni extremism. Alawis supportive of the revolution but somewhat fearful of its ultimate outcome have tended to cultivate a narrative of a pluralist Syria. The organising committee drafted a declaration which stated: 'The regime, which is becoming more isolated and weak, is working on turning sectarian zealotry into bloodshed. There are anti-regime forces also pushing toward sectarian warfare.... Depriving the regime of the sectarian card is crucial for its ouster and for negotiating a Syrian

national covenant on the basis of a modern statehood and equal citizenship and justice.'[56] In this vein, Issam al-Youssef, an activist present in Cairo, commented that he once took part in a pro-democracy demonstration in the Sunni district of al-Khalidiya in Homs when the protesters came under attack by a pro-Asad militia. 'A group of us took refuge in a house, and the house owner, who did not know I was Alawite, began cursing Alawites. When my comrades told him I was one, he came to me and gave me the keys to his house.' Yousef implored: 'We as Alawites are Syrians first. We are trying to be part of a real change.'[57]

His words jar with the hatred that other Alawi participants experienced in areas controlled by Islamists. A delegate commented that: 'There was one instance when I was in a town, there was a banner: "It is forbidden for Alawites and dogs to enter."' He said that tensions between the Alawis and Sunnis had a long history and that was why it surprised many Syrians that Alawis were among the anti-regime protests in March 2011. 'There was a huge welcoming, we were embraced. People were even excited,' Jamal said, 'but then it all changed. We became *persona non grata*. Now we have cases of killings based on your sectarian identity.'[58]

Momentum generated by the Alawi Opposition Conference is evident on Facebook and other virtual forums. So far, inside the opposition, Alawis have remained a heterogeneous group. The majority, without any ethno-religious inclination, still reject the idea of forming an Alawi party to challenge Asad's hegemony, while a minority see this as a possibility, especially given the sectarian trajectory of the Syrian civil war.

A second Alawi Opposition Conference was held in Istanbul, on 12–13 November 2013, but of the 115 participants the majority were not Alawi.[59] Although some well-known leftist Alawis attended, such as Bassam Sharif, Thaer Musa, Jamal Sulayman, Ali Dibu, and Tawfiq Dunya, other well-known Alawi opposition politicians questioned its value and failed to show up. High-ranking participants came from the National Coalition, including its then President Ahmed Jarba, a Sunni who financed this conference, and Ahmed Tomeh, Prime Minister of the opposition Interim Government, who is also a Sunni. This conference downplayed the 'Alawi character' of the endeavour and focused on presenting a platform for all communities. This was reflected in the conference statement, which contained no message that specifically addressed the Alawi or any other Syrian minority community. Instead it focused on the shared fear of losing the revolution: 'The Syrian revolution is now in real danger...the current moment requires all the components of the Syrian people

to take full responsibility for saving Syria. The greatest victory by the tyrant is that our values are inflicted, when he instils desires of religious, sectarian, and national extremism.'[60]

The participants called for a 'national conference' to be held with all parties to the Syrian opposition, political and military wings, including civil organisations, to formulate a national action agenda for the upcoming phase of the revolution.[61] In most respects, the participating Alawis among the opposition share its mainstream political principles and decisions. The conference showed once more that the emergence of a narrowly defined Alawi strategy or even political party in the near future is highly unlikely. The Janus face of the Syrian Alawi community—both perpetrators and victims/regime and opposition—will continue to haunt it throughout the ever more violent conflict and beyond into a transition period where it will have to re-negotiate and re-establish a living-together of its historic components.

12

REPRESSION IS NOT 'A STUPID THING'

REGIME RESPONSES TO THE SYRIAN UPRISING AND INSURGENCY

Reinoud Leenders

A common perception of the Syrian regime's response to the uprising-turned-insurgency has been to stress that it, and President Bashar al-Asad especially, has been hopelessly out of touch with the breath-taking developments since the Arab Spring struck Syria in March 2011. In this reading of events, the regime has had no idea how to respond to the unprecedented popular challenges to its fifty years in power except by what it knows best—senseless violence and repression. Likewise, and with regime violence against protesters and rebels reaching apocalyptic dimensions, the regime and its incumbents have been depicted as irrational, incompetent, and lacking the finesse to save their own skin. The ways in which the Syrian regime has been portrayed are in keeping with a common tendency to view authoritarian regimes, especially those in the Middle East, and their use of violence as deeply irrational, and—from ill-defined but morally unwavering liberal perspectives—as always counterproductive, destructive and self-defeating. Accordingly, the more violence the Syrian regime used, the more it came to be portrayed as inherently inad-

equate and senseless. In his questioning of the irrational qualities habitually attributed to armed conflict and violence generally, one scholar, Christopher Cramer, gave his book the title 'civil war is not a stupid thing'.[1] Similarly, but with far more modest objectives, the argument presented here regarding the conflict in Syria is that authoritarian governance and repression has not been a 'stupid thing' either. On the contrary, moral considerations and judgements set aside, the Syrian regime's responses to the uprising and insurgency at the local, national, regional and international levels suggest that it is 'in touch', calculative, rational, and learning—if by trial and error, even if they have not defeated all the daunting challenges that remain and that are likely to mount in the near future. Indeed, the growing strength of the insurgency may eventually cause the regime's demise. Yet the regime's tactics, strategies and adaptability are key to understanding how and why, after being hammered for more than four years by mass protests and a vicious insurgency, the Syrian regime is still there: shaken, damaged, but alive and kicking.

The imagery of the unworldly tyrant

The image of Asad and his wife surfing the internet, downloading songs and enjoying virtual shopping sprees perhaps most powerfully evoked the impression of a pitiful dictator locked up in his palace without appreciating the formidable and urgent challenges against his regime. A journalist for the *Guardian*, which in March 2012 published leaked emails from Asad, his wife and their aides, said: 'You do get a sense from a lot of the emails of a life in a gilded cocoon extraordinarily insulated from [...] the horrors going on in the rest of the country.'[2] Writing for the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, commentator Tareq al-Humayid also claimed that Asad 'is completely detached from reality…[and]…is committed to continuing the killing until the bitter end'.[3] Syrian activists evoked similar imagery, perhaps most vividly with the satirical puppet theatre group Masasit Mati, which consistently staged its main presidential character 'Bashu' as a lonesome individual, mesmerised by the tumult around his palace, and with few people left to converse with except 'Shabih' and, speaking from hell, his late father Hafez.[4] Underscoring this imagery, some Syrian activists highlighted regime incumbents' rural backgrounds, in addition to their supposed inferiority complexes with regard to 'modernity' more generally, and their resultant crude manners which prevented them, first, from foreseeing the fiercest challenge against their rule since the early 1980s, and then addressing it.[5] Other observers emphasised the Syrian regime's

anachronistic qualities which, they argued, equally prevented it from formulating an effective answer to the uprising. Typically, in his account of 'the dictator's learning curve', William Dobson failed to detect a modicum of intelligence in the Syrian regime's 'savagery' since March 2011.[6] 'Increasingly isolated and with no legitimacy left, the Syrian government appeared less tenable by the day. In the face of a twenty-first-century revolution, Assad had opted for a slow-burning twentieth-century crackdown.'[7]

The Syrian regime's successes, especially in 2013 and 2014, evidenced by relative military gains on an increasingly chaotic battlefield, have somewhat muted these early appraisals of its patent inadequacies. Yet most analyses of the Syrian crisis only slightly qualified the common assumption of the irrational, unworldly and inadequate tyrant. Many observers continued to see in these traits foreboding of the regime's inevitable downfall, even when variously acknowledging that the latter would take longer than at first expected. Thus, Arab commentator Abd al-Bari Atwan claimed that the Syrian regime's unwavering position and its refusal to negotiate was due to Asad's failure to recognise what he was up against. The latter, Atwan argued, was acting 'as if Syria is an oasis of stability and safety and is not witnessing a civil war [...]'.[8] In a similar vein, Rami Khoury, a commentator for the Lebanese *Daily Star*, responded to a defiant speech Asad gave in the Damascus Opera House: 'It was operatic in its otherwordly fantasy, unrelated to realities outside the building.'[9] UN envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi expressed the same sentiment in more diplomatic terms when he remarked that the Syrian president appeared deluded by his inner circle telling him about a terrorist conspiracy that could only be met with an iron first.[10] Growing regime violence continued to baffle observers, prompting some to see evidence of the regime's 'lack of skill at warfare' in its indiscriminate use of 'barrel bombs', especially in and near Aleppo at the end of 2013,[11] and others to observe that the regime's own failure to reach out to its opponents gave rebels no choice other than to fight on. Writing at the end of 2013, Middle East reporter Robin Yassin-Kassab summed up the many reasons why 'Syria is a dictatorship which lacks an efficient dictator' while providing proof of Asad's 'inability to respond flexibly' to the uprising and the insurgency.[12]

Syrian protesters and activists may be forgiven for downplaying or, in hindsight, underestimating the regime's capacity to gauge correctly the uprising-turned-insurgency, to respond, to learn and to adjust.[13] After all, as Syria's pre-eminent intellectual and philosopher Sadiq al-Azm explained, it was in the very act of mobilisation against the regime that Syrians discovered that

they could overcome their 'inferiority complex [...] in the face of this military regime's overall power'.[14] Their assessment of a faltering regime is not to be mistaken for careful analysis, as it was rather an instrument to inform a rallying cry aimed at pulling down the barrier of fear that had thwarted collective contentious action for decades. Charles Tilly has already warned that 'the trouble with stories', particularly those of revolutionaries, is that they provide an 'execrable guide' to both facts and social explanation, exactly because their narratives are not designed to elucidate but to change realities.[15] Commentators less engaged in such activist agendas and academic analysts, however, have also consistently echoed assessments of the regime's inertia and inadequacy. Indeed, such appraisals are congruent with common analyses of Bashar al-Asad's supposed lack of leadership capabilities following his ascent to power in 2000 and of the regime's alleged inertia and anachronistic qualities more generally.[16] Together, these appraisals appear to stand in a long tradition of viewing authoritarianism as ultimately and inherently crippled by qualities that render it ill-equipped to deal effectively with mass contention and popular challenges.

Deaf to tremors and ill-advised repression?

The assessment of the Syrian regime's alleged insanity, and its being out of touch with the dramatic changes sweeping through the region since the Arab Spring, appeared to be underscored on the eve of the Syrian uprising when Asad gave his now infamous interview to the *Wall Street Journal*.[17] Here he confidently declared that Syria would remain immune to the wave of protests in the Arab world, due to its presumed 'exceptionalism' in connection with the regime's adaptability and the popularity of its foreign policies, defying Israel, the US and their 'moderate' Arab allies in the region. Of course he was wrong, but then so were most pundits and, indeed, many theorists on popular mobilisation and revolutions. The latter stress that people mobilise when they face or see 'structural opportunities', such as state–elite divisions, *coups*, defeat in war or any other development pointing up sudden cracks within the ruling elite.[18] Immediately prior to the uprising, the Syrian regime did not experience any of this, and hence it felt assured that it could weather the storm raging elsewhere in the region. If Asad's and the regime's arrogance on the eve of the uprising is to be dismissed as proof of them being 'out of touch', we have to categorise the analytical perspectives of most Middle East pundits likewise. Asad and the regime were not the only ones to have missed a development

wherein there were rapidly changing perceptions among infuriated citizens that prompted mobilisation; and not sudden regime weaknesses. Encouraged by events in Tunisia and Egypt, and angered by the regime's humiliating use of violence against early protests, an increasing number of Syrians cast their movement, at home and abroad, as an imperative to take to the streets, brave the risks of regime violence, and challenge it in the teeth of power, first by calling for fundamental reforms and then quickly for the regime's overthrow. The self-expressive motivations that drove these 'early risers' were shaped by social and, in part, quasi-tribal norms about honour, gender, courage and other ideals.[19] Arguably, their activation and salience was for a great part endogenous to the emboldening and communicable emotions unleashed by mobilisation itself, and foreseeable by neither the regime nor even the protesters themselves.[20]

When the regime's security forces opened fire on Syria's early risers in Dar'a, a regional backwater in the Hawran in the south-west of the country, repression turned out to ignite and radicalise further protests. Again, the regime stood accused of making a grave mistake. But even those academics studying the nexus between repression and mobilisation have failed to produce a clear-cut and persuasive explanation of why and how, and under what conditions, repression counters mobilisation and when it inflames it.[21] As it turned out, the people of Dar'a framed regime violence as adding insult to the injury suffered by the arrest of two women and fifteen schoolchildren earlier, which caused them to discount fears over repression by their calls for dignity. That could hardly have been foreseen by anyone; not by those studying the effects of repression on mobilisation, and not by the regime. At first, the regime seems to have been acutely aware of the variable effects of repression, and was indeed split over how to respond to protests. In the few months that preceded the Syrian uprising the regime reportedly issued instructions to government officials to listen to citizens' complaints and pacify restive populations, while Interior Minister Said Sammur personally intervened to calm down a spontaneous gathering of protestors in Hariqa market in Damascus on 16 February 2011.[22] At the same time, however, a government special committee examining the possibility of protests breaking out in Syria reportedly concluded that the main reason why protests had cascaded in Tunisia and Egypt had been a failure to crush the protests at their onset, and that this should be avoided in Syria.[23] As the regime appeared to be in two minds on predicting the effects of repression, security forces were given no clear instructions as to how to deal with mass protests when they commenced.[24] It is likely that they took matters

in their own hands when they were confronted by mass protests in places like Dar'a, thereby inadvertently escalating the protests they wanted to curb. At that point, the regime appears to have quickly tilted toward ordering a harsh response to prevent escalation. Intuitively, the regime in this respect may have sensed what game theorists have tried to formalise in their models on mobilisation cascades.[25] Mobilisation in repressive environments, game theorists reason, is rare because typically isolated activists have little certainty concerning the preferences of others or the level of shared willingness to take significant risks by going onto the streets. Yet when under these conditions mobilisation does somehow occur, it sends important signals and information to others, affecting their decision to join the movement. Asad only had to turn on his television set to watch the reports from Tunisia and Egypt and see how 'early risers' there quickly managed to increase their ranks when not dealt with decisively. In this context, both regime incumbents and protesters appear to have been aware of the likely cascading effects of protests as '[s]treet demonstrations are the demonstration that the most sacrosanct of authoritarian values, order itself, has been violated'.[26] One does not have to be 'out of touch' or irrational to be ineffective in one's response to such a profound and unpredictable discursive shift, immoral as the regime's choice for massive repression may have been.[27]

Countering protest diffusion

Until the siege of Dar'a in April 2011, and given Syria's fragmented landscape of prevailing local, regional and transnational identities, the chances were that events there would ultimately remain a local affair of limited nationwide significance. Even activists in Damascus were initially doubtful that Dar'a could be a sufficient trigger for nationwide mobilisation. The regime thought—and clearly hoped—likewise. Indeed, the manipulation of local identities and regionalism had been one of the regime's key instruments of control prior to the uprising.[28] From the regime's perspective, there was no immediate reason why this would not prove its utility again.[29] Accordingly, the regime portrayed the protests as expressing merely local grievances, it allowed MPs from Dar'a to underscore protesters' Hawrani identity in parliament as if to deny that their demands had any nationwide significance,[30] it replaced local governors, and it initiated a 'national dialogue' at the municipal level, culminating in proposed reforms of local governance and, in December 2011, local elections.[31] All such efforts were accompanied by the regime's frantic efforts to

resuscitate and embolden local allies and create new ones amidst their communities. Meanwhile the regime erected checkpoints throughout the country, as if physically to underline the nation's fragmentation and henceforth cripple mobilisation.[32] Evidently, the regime's attempt to contain the protests failed locally; but not because it was unresponsive. It failed because protesters nationwide momentarily turned sustained geographical cross-referencing among themselves into a major tool of mobilisation, which quickly lifted Dar'a out of its perceived marginality to the country as a whole and which culminated in protesters' remarkable efforts to rediscover or even create a national platform for their shared challenge to the regime.[33] Ultimately, however, the regime's unrelenting efforts to cause the uprising to fragment and return to being localised had some success, although this only materialised after the threat of sectarian violence had been significantly heightened and after the uprising had decisively turned into an insurgency. As Keder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur observed, '[e]vents conspired to drag the uprising back onto the regime's home turf—the politics of region'.[34]

From the beginning of the uprising, protesters proved to be so elusive and persistent largely because they drew on diffuse, clan-based or quasi-tribal solidarity networks.[35] In many ways that proved to be a serious obstacle for security forces and the regime's intelligence agencies, the *Mukhabarat*, in quelling the protests, because they failed to penetrate such networks fully. Thus, security forces in the early days of the uprising arrested members of the Abu Zeid clan in Dar'a en masse, instead of taking out its key mobilisers.[36] The regime then responded by courting leaders and heads of clans and tribes throughout the country.[37] This carrot-and-stick approach had mixed results, but it reportedly helped to drive a wedge within tribes and sub-tribal clans between supporters and opponents of the regime or those taking a more cautious approach, most notably affecting the Baqqara tribal confederation in and around Aleppo, the north-east and Deir az-Zur, the Jabbur tribe in and around Hassakeh, and the Ta'i tribe in Qamishli.[38] Yet poor intelligence on mobilisers' elusive and leaderless networks, of a tribal nature or otherwise, continued to pose a problem for the regime. For instance, files seized in an abandoned Military Intelligence facility in Raqqa, after the town fell into rebel hands in March 2013, indiscriminately listed all local college students as potential troublemakers, thereby suggesting that the regime had little clue about the identity of key activists.[39] Yet its focus on clans and tribes suggests that the regime was reading the uprising correctly. Similarly, the regime understood that the elusive networks enabling and fuelling mobilisation to an important degree centred on cross-border

movements and smuggling, as the latter provided the activists with key resources and social capital to withstand the regime's onslaught. In view of this, the regime launched a campaign branding protesters as 'a bunch of smugglers',[40] sent its own unsavoury characters to compete with these networks (including former inmates who were conditionally released), and shut the borders for weeks on end. The regime's efforts to retain control over the country's borders appear to have been a key preoccupation of Asad himself as he repeatedly mentioned it in interviews and meetings with foreign dignitaries as being of vital importance to counter smugglers and insurgents.[41]

Playing the sectarian and ethnic identity card

At first, both the regime and the protesters stressed their all-inclusive credentials when it came to Syria's multi-sectarian society. The regime has for decades carefully built an image of itself as the guarantor of the country's sectarian peace, notwithstanding the fact that most of its key decision-makers, its security services and its officer corps are recruited from within the Alawi community, constituting some eleven percent of the population. Such regime claims were more than hollow rhetoric, as it made efforts to incorporate and co-opt Sunni Arabs, first by way of civil service appointments and, more recently, when regime strongmen married into the families of Sunni Arab entrepreneurs. For their part, protesters underscored their non-sectarian intentions, even when they overwhelmingly drew on the Sunni Arab community, constituting some sixty percent of the population. Yet perceived threat levels on all sides quickly reached alarming heights which, combined with escalating violence, irrevocably transformed both narratives. The regime readily invented, built, encouraged and manipulated sectarian divisions that dramatically altered—and undermined—the uprising's dynamics. Its tactics in this context included violence, at times at atrocious levels, which generated and affected perceptions and raw fears serving the regime. Accordingly, and until the summer of 2011, regime forces had inflicted heavy casualties among largely unarmed protesters, especially in areas inhabited by a mix of sectarian communities living side-by-side, foremost Alawis and Sunni Arabs.[42] Nir Rosen, a correspondent for Al-Jazeera who visited Syria during the early months of the uprising, documented in detail how, in the context of increased polarisation, sectarian stereotyping and prejudice had found their way to the local level as neighbouring villages and communities within villages engaged in mutual sectarian violence.[43] Sectarian 'boundary activa-

tion'—the heightening of perceived differences between members of the in- and out-group—quickly became an overpowering response to increased levels of insecurity on all sides. Reports and rumours of violent attacks against Alawis, especially regime officers and their families, widely publicised in Syria's state-controlled media, prompted fears of a Sunni–Arab determination to make the entire Alawi community pay for the regime's violence. Swept up and mobilised by increasingly antagonistic sectarian narratives, newly created pro-regime militias, including local 'popular committees' and *Shabiha*, unleashed unprecedented levels of aggressive violence against protesters, especially in Homs.[44] The regime had initially, and unsuccessfully, tried to resuscitate vigilante groups from within the moribund Ba'ath Party in order to relieve its overstretched regular forces. It eagerly embraced the new armed groups, brought them new recruits by releasing criminal offenders, gave them access to arms depots and funding, coordinated their operations with the *Mukhabarat*, and drew on their template to promote the proliferation of pro-regime militias throughout the country, primarily by establishing the National Defence Force (NDF) (see below). Forces associated with the NDF increasingly engaged in sectarian killings, escalating into numerous massacres, especially since early 2012 and most notoriously in Hula and Qubayr in May and June of that year.[45]

Although the regime clearly carries prime responsibility for the sectarian turn in the uprising, and duly benefited from the resulting polarisation setting Syria's religious communities against one another, not all of its actions that underscored sectarian narratives appear to have been deliberately designed to generate that effect. For instance, in order to make it more difficult for army defectors to leave their barracks, military bases were often moved to Alawi and/or Christian areas in cities and towns, assuming that defecting soldiers were likely to be Sunni Arabs without communal ties to their barracks' environment that otherwise could facilitate their escape. When artillery barrages then commenced from these compounds directed at other parts of the town, impressions were reinforced that the onslaught had a clear sectarian rationale. Even more dramatically, sectarian framing was encouraged and taken to extreme levels, in regime attempts to circumvent its difficulty in identifying and targeting its opponents' leadership and key instigators. After it had indiscriminately rounded up members of the Abu Zeid clan in Dar'a, the regime applied a similar logic throughout the country, taking Sunni Arab identity markers as a proxy for anti-regime sentiments, subversive activities or providing support to protesters and rebels. Consequently, regime forces combed out

mixed areas for suspected opposition supporters by targeting those with Arab Sunni names. It then flattened entire villages and urban neighbourhoods populated by Arab Sunnis, starting with the regime's artillery assault on the Bab al-Amr quarter in Homs between February and May 2012.

Rising sectarian sentiments and existentialist fears both boosted and were fuelled by the nascent jihadist–salafist camp in the opposition, not least because it offered an expedient doctrine casting their struggle as one against a heretical Alawi regime and its Shi'a agents (described as *rawafidh*, 'rejectionists' of the true faith). Protesters increasingly adopted anti-Alawi slogans, or recited in praise the name of the exiled and staunchly anti-Alawi cleric Adnan al-'Arur. Meanwhile, and nearing the summer of 2011, the regime released jihadist–salafist prisoners, many of whom joined and some of whom led the many radical Islamist armed groups that began to drive violent contention in early 2012.[46] Reinforced by foreign jihadists, who mostly joined Jabhat al-Nusra and then the Islamic state in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the insurgency steadily gained a jihadist–salafist character. Among other factors, this marginalised non-Islamist or more moderate fighting groups directly or loosely associated with the Free Syrian Army and the Unified Military Command. For good measure, the regime allegedly spared foreign-dominated jihadist–salafist groups in its onslaught against the rebels, and it reportedly collaborated with Jabhat al-Nusra in allowing the transport of oil from areas under the armed group's control in the north-east to regime-held areas.[47] Regime forces also appear to have spared ISIS headquarters from their intense bombing campaign in rebel-held areas, as one eyewitness reported from Raqqa in the autumn of 2013.[48] Under these conditions, the regime's insistence on a 'takfiri terrorist conspiracy' no longer appeared far-fetched. From the regime's perspective, the pay-offs were numerous: it mobilised and helped bind most of the Alawis to it, just as it made many Christians opt for what they saw as the lesser evil of the regime; it provided growing distraction from the protesters' initial demands to overhaul nearly fifty years of stiff authoritarian rule; it helped marshal Iran and Hizballah behind the regime, as they had their own reasons to counter the jihadist–salafist current; it resonated with Moscow's own problems with radical Islamist activism, encouraging Russia to throw its full weight behind the regime; and it significantly complicated and ultimately discouraged Europe and the US from supporting the rebels more generally.

On top of utilising and magnifying Syria's sectarian divides, the regime cunningly manipulated the country's ethnic splits. In April 2011 it made concessions to the Kurds, constituting some ten to fifteen percent of the population,

first by granting citizenship to stateless Kurds, and then by allowing the PKK-aligned Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party, PYD) to control parts of Kurdish-majority areas in the north-east of the country. Most immediately, this enabled the regime to divert scarce troops away from the Kurdish-controlled areas to be deployed elsewhere in the country, although the regime's state institutions kept operating in Qamishli and its secret police are said to be omnipresent in all PYD-controlled areas.[49] The regime's tactics also drove a wedge between the Kurds and the mainstream Syrian opposition, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), dominated by Arab Sunnis who resented the Kurds for failing to play a significant role in the insurgency and for 'collaborating' with the regime.[50] Rifts widened as Kurdish leaders began to distrust the opposition for its insistence on Syria's Arab identity in disregard of Kurdish rights and autonomy claims. After more than two years of bickering, the SNC in September 2013 finally agreed to drop the word 'Arab' from its envisaged 'Syrian Republic' after Asad.[51] Yet the belated concession was quickly overshadowed by repeated clashes later that year, pitching Kurdish militias against Islamist–Jihadist fighters from nearby Raqqa, thereby giving new currency to widespread suspicion that the PYD acted as an auxiliary force against the regime's fiercest enemies. In January 2014, the PYD declared 'self-administration' in the areas under its control, thereby refuelling Arab opposition fears over Kurdish separatist agendas. On top of all this, and just as beneficial to the regime, de facto autonomy for the Kurds saddled Turkey, initially perhaps the most vocal enthusiast of Syrian regime change, with the presence of an armed, unpredictable entity waving PKK flags on its very doorstep.

Wartime patrimonialism

In their search for the root causes of the uprising, many Syria watchers and commentators variously emphasised the regime's socio-economic policies as it abandoned its populist 'social contract', essentially a patrimonial arrangement swapping material favours beyond the regime's immediate circles for acquiescence.[52] Against this background, the regime's one-time beneficiaries felt increasingly marginalised by the selective economic reforms and rampant cronyism that accompanied them, especially since Asad took office in 2000. With increasing poverty and socio-economic inequality, 'something had to give', as one scholar put it.[53] That may or may not turn out to be a persuasive or sufficient explanation for the uprising. Yet an impressive array of regime measures in response to the uprising suggests that its own analysis matches the aca-

demic consensus. Since the beginning of the uprising the following measures have been taken:[54] salaries of public servants were raised, irregular staff at public institutions were given a fixed contract, a large number of young Syrians were given public service employment, cuts in subsidies on fuel were reversed, consumer taxes were lowered, farmers' and manufacturers' state debts were waived, cotton growers received higher prices for their produce, and the amount of money needed to buy oneself out of military service was reduced. In addition, monetary policies were enacted, vigorously aimed at containing inflation and preventing a collapse of the Syrian pound. Cuts in taxes and fees, in addition to a temporary ban on sheep exports, further contributed to keeping price inflation from reaching the exorbitant levels that struck Iraq under international sanctions in the 1990s. In conjunction, the regime stepped up its surveying of slums, or 'irregular neighbourhoods', which it had started doing since 2008.[55] It released funds and issued tenders to 'rebuild' or 'improve'—and hence control—them. The regime also announced plans to build 50,000 low-cost housing units in a bid to provide affordable housing;[56] access to which undoubtedly will be premised on regime loyalty, if indeed these plans ever materialise. Stated policies like these, of course, are belied by relentless pounding by regime forces of these same areas and, since July 2012, the deliberate demolition, using bulldozers and explosives, of vast residential areas in the suburbs of Damascus and Hama as punishment for their residents' support of the opposition.[57] Yet the regime's trumpeting of its mollifying policies in this respect and, failing these, its resort to inflicting vast destruction, speak volumes about its reading of the uprising as rooted in the socio-economic deprivation and pauperisation associated with the demise of its social contract.

The regime pursued its patrimonial logic to its extreme in its fight against insurgents over control of territory and population. Within the regime's own enclaves, it ensured that government institutions continued to function, civil servants got paid, and basic services, such as electricity supplies, were by and large ensured. Private entrepreneurs, dependent on the regime, were encouraged, and some say forced, to spend considerable sums on humanitarian aid for the displaced and suffering civilians in regime-controlled areas. Pro-regime businessmen used their charities, such as Rami Makhluf's Bustan Foundation, to support the families of the wounded or fallen *Shabiha* and members of the popular committees.[58] The regime also took advantage of international humanitarian aid providers who, by their imperative of operating within the constraints of state sovereignty, were forced to base themselves in regime-held areas. As Ben Parker, the Syria country chief of the UN Office for the Coor-

dination of Humanitarian Affairs until February 2013, explained: 'In government-controlled parts of Syria, what, where and to whom to distribute aid, and even staff recruitment, have to be negotiated and are sometimes dictated.'[59] The regime at times engaged in a 'tit-for-tat' approach allowing aid agencies access to besieged civilians in exchange for aid to regime sympathisers whom the government cannot access.[60] It repeatedly removed international aid items from convoys destined to rebel-held territory,[61] presumably to distribute these among regime supporters. In all, and to increasingly war-weary citizens, the message was clear: if you value a modicum of normalcy, the regime is your best bet for survival.

The flipside of the regime's wartime patrimonialism, of course, has been to make civilian life in rebel-held territories as miserable as possible. Systematically denying access to humanitarian assistance has been key in this respect. Following UN Security Council resolution 2139 on 22 February 2014, which called for unrestricted humanitarian access, the regime allowed some international aid to be delivered to all governorates, except Deir az-Zur where convoys were refused entry at government checkpoints.[62] Yet red tape, administrative hurdles and the regime's refusal to allow for assistance crossing 'illegal' (i.e. rebel-held) border posts have deprived and continue to deprive millions of Syrians who reside in rebel-held territories throughout the country. Syrians providing aid to the displaced have been detained and in some cases prosecuted by the newly created anti-terrorism court on charges of 'financing acts of terrorism'.[63] In May 2014, the regime dissolved the boards of fifteen charities in Damascus for 'not operating appropriately'.[64] By the end of July 2014, a total of 47 humanitarian aid workers were reported to have been killed, many of them by regime fire.[65] The Syrian Red Crescent Society, one of the very few Syrian organisations the regime allows to operate, seems overall to have upheld its neutrality and at times managed to cross the front lines. Yet it too stood accused of bowing to the regime's dictates by halting aid provision to rebel-held areas or to families suspected of ties to the opposition.[66]

Not contesting rebel control over territories throughout the country was largely informed by the regime's limited military capabilities. Yet it had the added advantages of freeing up financial resources to pamper the regime's own enclaves, allowing rebel groups' infighting over loot and turf to run their full course, and tarnishing the opposition's reputation due to its largely bungled attempts to provide basic services and restore law and order in the areas under their control. In an interview with Hizballah's television station Al-Manar in May 2013, Asad remarked: 'The main reason for tipping the balance [in the

regime's favour] is the change in people's opinion in areas that used to incubate armed groups, not necessarily due to lack of patriotism on their part, but because they were deceived.'[67] Yet to the extent that the battle was about winning hearts and minds, the regime had plenty to offer to those who were not won over. Especially from the ferocious pounding of Homs in early 2012 onwards, the regime routinely subjected rebel-held areas to indiscriminate shelling, notoriously targeted local bakeries, causing maximum civilian casualties, and, first recorded in August 2012,[68] it dropped 'barrel bombs' onto residential areas causing havoc from which no one could offer protection. The systematic combination of regime-imposed deprivation with wanton violence culminated in what in October 2013 Syrian security officials and regime supporters coined the 'Starvation Until Submission Campaign';[69] laying siege to, sealing off and starving densely inhabited areas held by rebels, including districts and suburbs in Damascus, most prominently Yarmuk, Eastern Ghouta and Daraya, the old city of Homs, and in Aleppo and Hassakeh, trapping an estimated 175,000 people by March 2014.[70]

The regime's war of information

The regime's media policies have often been written off as a dismal failure, and viewed as more proof of its inertia and lack of ingenuity. Certainly, the regime's media outlets, whether state-owned media or its 'private' counterparts such as ad-Dunya television and the daily newspaper *al-Watan*, have been no match to the increasingly sophisticated use by protesters of social media and the astounding proliferation of 'citizens' journalism' since the first days of the uprising. At times the regime's media reporting bordered on the ridiculous and undoubtedly undermined its cause. For instance, ad-Dunya TV alleged that foreign media erected replicas of Syrian cities and towns in Qatar, home of Al-Jazeera, to stage demonstrations that, it claimed, never occurred.[71] Yet otherwise the regime's efforts to counter or dilute the reach and impact of protesters' media campaigns are tangible, and from its perspective have had some success.

The Syrian 'Electronic Army' is the best known regime answer to sprawling social media activism. Hailed by Asad in a speech in June 2011,[72] it specialised in eavesdropping on social media, email and internet use, hacking and phishing. Having gained something of a mythical status as the regime's cyber warfare unit, the Syrian Electronic Army is believed to consist of both freewheeling regime supporters and operatives more formally attached to the

regime. Within the country’s major security and intelligence branches, numerous information rooms operate around the clock and are staffed by young IT students hired for the task and army conscripts.[73] They report to and are coordinated by the Syrian security communications branch, codenamed ‘Branch 225’, based in the Muhajirin neighbourhood of Damascus. In October 2011 an international network of internet activists named Telecomix found evidence of massive government surveillance and censorship in Syria, using internet spying appliances developed by the US company Blue Coat and Cisco Systems.[74] The regime was also found to have planted internet spyware on activists’ computers, disguised as encryption services for Skype, to track a target’s location and get access to emails.[75] Branch 225 also appears to have been responsible for numerous internet and mobile phone communications blackouts or internet speed reductions affecting neighbourhoods and areas that the regime wished to cut off from the outside world.

Yet perhaps even more importantly, a key aspect of the regime’s media response has been to cast doubt over the authenticity and reliability of protesters’ reports. Thus, in the spring of 2011 the regime was quick to launch a weekly television series, ‘Lies of the Opposition’, to claim in often excruciating detail that opposition activists, in collaboration with international and Arab media outlets, doctored and manipulated YouTube footage to give false backing to their circumspect agendas and conceal their violent methods. In addition, security forces uploaded their own footage, for instance following their attack on Dar’a’s ‘Umari mosque in April 2011, perhaps to parade their trophies, to show ‘evidence’ of activists’ arms storages, or to deter activists hoping to follow Dara’s example of protest.[76] On other occasions, Syrian state television even appeared deliberately to mimic the often-poor quality of activists’ YouTube footage, for instance in August 2011 by broadcasting clips from Hama that, from shaky and upside-down angles, showed alleged terrorists emptying their firearms on civilians. On top of this, the Syrian regime was the source of clearly doctored footage uploaded in order to raise doubts over the authenticity of the opposition’s digitalised media campaign.[77] Muddling the situation even further, Syrian Army soldiers were alleged to have staged their own (faked) atrocities in order to sell their clips to mainly Arab satellite television stations that pay for exclusive footage.[78] In addition to refusing to allow international journalists to report freely from the country, the regime systematically targeted professional journalists (both Syrian and foreign), internet media activists and activists developing software to circumvent government restrictions and surveillance of the internet

with deadly violence and arrest. The regime has been responsible for the deaths of many of the thirty professional journalists killed since March 2011, in addition to the deaths of 107 'citizen journalists' and internet activists, and the detention of scores of others.[79]

All this has not prevented anti-regime mobilisers from effectively transmitting their messages to foreign audiences, but it certainly hampered them. Perhaps most importantly, doubts set in about the authenticity and reliability of social media messages coming from Syria. Most international media outlets responded by adding disclaimers when airing Syrian activists' footage, stressing that these could not be independently verified. In some instances, the regime effectively showed reports by international media and human rights organisations to be inaccurate, as in the case of a beheaded woman whose disfigured body Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International identified as that of Zainab al-Hosni, whom they claimed had been detained in July 2011. The latter was shown alive on Syrian state television on 4 October 2011 as proof of foreign media fabrications.[80] Meanwhile, some 'embedded' foreign journalists, including Rainer Hermann of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and Robert Fisk of the UK *Independent* newspaper, produced stories that backed the regime's narrative on the uprising as driven by sectarian zeal, violence, and dominated by terrorist jihadists from the start.[81] The upshot has been that most international media—always searching for 'balanced' reporting even if equilibria are in short supply—became suspicious of protesters' stories coming from the uprising, while some settled for a narrative of Syria as 'a land of confusion, where the truth is elusive, undefined, impossible to verify, and impossible to know'.[82] The regime, in short, made some important progress in creating a virtual version of the proverbial fog of war.

When jihadists, including foreign fighters, entered the battlefield in early 2012, Syrian state media's reporting on the 'takfiri terrorist conspiracy' no longer appeared absurd. Footage and reports of rebel atrocities, whether pushed or even fabricated by the regime or not, increasingly reached and helped to shape perceptions of both domestic and Western audiences.[83] The spectacular advances made by ISIS in June 2014 in Iraq only augmented these sentiments. Acutely aware of the change in public mood, the government mobilised English-speaking businessmen at home and hired public relations firms abroad to project a successful image of a necessary, all-out war against Islamist extremism and terrorism.[84] When, by mid-2013, it had become clear that not the regime but jihadist–salafists posed the greatest danger to journalists, the regime lifted some of its restrictions on Western journalists and

granted them more visas. Far fewer now dare to visit rebel-held territory. As a result, the *Economist* noted, 'coverage of the regime has become kinder'.[85]

From suppressing protests to counter-insurgency

The regime's responses to mass protests and rebellion variously leaned on the use of extreme levels of violence. Ultimately, this paid off. As pointed out earlier, the regime's crackdown contributed to the militarisation of anti-regime mobilisation, markedly so since the end of 2011. In this context the regime may have reasoned that this, in turn, would transform the confrontation between the regime and its ever-growing numbers of protesters into an armed conflict wherein the regime, given its superior military capabilities, would stand a much better chance of winning or surviving. After all, an insurgency requires very different kinds of expertise, experience, skills, resources and modes of organisation than does non-violent mobilisation. Partly as a result, far fewer people can be expected to be willing, prepared or able to take an active part in violent contention. Arguably, therefore, the military stand-off that ensued, and which lasts until today, contained a far slimmer chance of delivering regime change than the peaceful and popularly driven protests that challenged the regime in the first few months of the uprising. The regime's tactics in this respect were acutely sensed by some Syrian activists.[86] Among other things, they realised that the use of violence as one means of contention tends to become overriding, or even hegemonic, as it drives out or literally outguns other forms of contention.[87] In essence, they were caught up in a dilemma of neither fully rejecting nor effectively preventing anti-regime violence for reasons of legitimate self-defence, even when they resisted the use of arms because they feared that this would effectively cause their demobilisation, or because they feared that this would play into the regime's hands, or out of principle. In time, such activists seemed like small fry compared to the threat of machinegun-toting insurgents. Yet those who insisted on peaceful protests were systematically targeted for arrest, beatings, torture, shootings and assassination by a regime that knew it was more likely to be overrun by the masses they could mobilise than by armed insurgents whose numbers, even when constituting a serious challenge, paled and still pale in comparison.[88] Whatever its exact calculation may have been, the regime was proved right to have gambled on its comparative advantage in military force, at least until very recently. Peaceful protests have not completely disappeared, and initially even seem to have been emboldened by their armed protectors,[89] but by mid-2012

they had failed to re-mobilise the threatening numbers of participants that had been reached by the autumn of 2011. Until March 2015 no significant foreign support materialised that could tip the balance in the rebels' favour. Subsequent rebel victories, such as their seizure of Idlib, certainly challenge the regime's military advantage but do not belie the fact that it has held on for so long.

For authoritarian regimes to rely on intense and sustained violence, two key challenges typically need to be addressed: one is to neutralise the 'moral hazard' wherein '[t]he very resources that enable a regime's repressive agents to suppress its opposition also empower it to act against the regime itself';[90] the second is to amplify suppressive capabilities given limited resources and manpower, and sustain discipline and force cohesion in the process. The Syrian regime formulated elaborate and, thus far, largely successful answers to both dilemmas. Precautionary *coup*-proofing measures developed and refined since the early 1970s are likely to have neutralised or even pre-empted the 'moral hazard' problem. As argued by James Quinlivan, many Arab regimes, including the Syrian regime, developed techniques 'that provide robust protection against coups' by 'creating parallel units in the vicinity of the capital that balance the power of the regular military; [and] creating multiple security services that watch potential dissidents and plotters, as well as each other'.[91] Accordingly, one defecting member of the *Mukhabarat* described Syria's armed forces as a 'security army' (*jaysh 'amni*), whereby all officers have an adjunct, at least one of each being Alawi and enjoying superior privileges.[92] Most senior security agents spying on military officers had military careers, and they have the final say in virtually all military decisions and manoeuvres, overruling regular military commanders. All these measures contributed to the discipline within and the reliability of the armed forces; for example, any officers and soldiers who refused to execute orders to shoot and kill protesters were themselves arrested or summarily executed by security agents embedded in their units.[93]

Eva Bellin added in this context that 'patrimonially organised security forces' provide another safety valve against *coups* because the prevalence of blood bonds or sect in key appointments and promotions, in addition to cronyism and corruption involving military elites, determine 'the degree to which the military elite is personally invested in the regime's survival'.[94] Upon succeeding his father in 2000, Asad refined these methods as he appointed many of his exclusively Alawi confidants to lead the country's multiple security branches, tasked them with infiltrating and checking the command of the regular armed

forces, and allowed top military leaders, most notoriously the Makhluf family, to swoop up business opportunities associated with economic reform.

Given the relative scarcity of personnel and limited military capabilities, their force amplification and ensuring fighting effectiveness required additional steps. For the regime, the key challenge in this respect was that its own armed forces were dwindling because of defections and desertions,[95] but also due to its own draconian measures against those refusing to obey orders and, more generally, significant purges and casualties. At the same time its need for troops was growing with the mounting number of both protesters and then insurgents. On top of this, the regime's armed forces suffered from the flaws associated with patrimonial organisation, typically causing them to be 'particularly corrupt and at times even inefficient, in part because the dictator has been more concerned with preventing his own overthrow by military coup than with establishing an effective fighting force'.[96] A number of key regime measures since March 2011 may in this respect be viewed as elaborate responses to these dilemmas: they relied unambiguously on force to clamp down on mass protests, thereby reducing the numbers of (now armed) contenders to more manageable proportions; regime forces incrementally took on insurgents in selected areas, primarily in cities and major towns and, after securing these, broadened their operations to parts of the countryside, to the double effect of sparing troops while fragmenting the insurgency among local warlords and an array of armed rebel groups, and driving wedges between them;[97] the regime rotated its elite praetorian units—the elite Fourth Armoured Division, the Republican Guards and the Special Forces regiments—between active front lines and paired them with regular units, both to boost their fighting capabilities and counter defections;[98] they increasingly relied on non-state militias primarily to relieve troops from having to retain conquered territories, starting with the *Shabiha* and popular committees and culminating, in early 2013, in the gradual institutionalisation of the 60–100,000-strong NDF;[99] and, finally, the regime invited Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Hizballah fighters and mainly Iraqi Shi'a volunteers to augment its armed capabilities, provide training, guidance and even fulfil command tasks. All these measures combined have gone a long way toward addressing the regime's manpower problems and its challenges in waging an effective counter-insurgency campaign, even when they failed in fully resolving them, and even when they may ultimately prove insufficient to defeat the insurgency. Thanks to the regime's rising fortunes until at least the early months of 2015, and with growing complicity in the regime's atrocities, the appetite for defection among the regime's regular armed

forces, even those units that still comprise many Arab Sunni foot-soldiers, has waned just as a shared sense of threat increased with the rising prominence of their jihadist enemies.

Learning from the Arab uprisings, 'black knights' and international poker

While protesters and insurgents learned from their counterparts elsewhere in the Arab world, received foreign support and played regional and international arenas to obtain recognition and political weight, so did the regime; and in ways that made it soon outflank the opposition on all fronts, despite overwhelming stated support for the opposition internationally.

By closely watching regional and international politics involving the fates of the Arab uprisings elsewhere, the Syrian regime furthered its capacity to learn from and adapt to the rapidly emerging challenges that the mass uprising posed for regime survival. This has been discernible in the way the Syrian regime watched how uprisings unfolded in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, took stock of international reactions to these events and, in response, developed strategies that it perceived would maximise its probabilities of survival. Developments abroad received close attention from the regime's media outlets, thereby suggesting a keen interest among regime supporters in the implications and lessons of regional events for Syria. For instance, the regime prevented undue international media attention on protesters seizing and occupying the cities' public squares, as occurred in Egypt. As shown by leaked orders allegedly issued up by the 'Crisis Management Cell' at the president's office and the Ba'ath Party's 'National Security Bureau', demonstrations in public squares in Damascus and other cities were to be avoided at all costs, primarily by sending in security forces, *Shabiha*, and Ba'ath Party members to occupy them permanently.[100] Consequently, Syrian activists complained that their inability to meet the aesthetic standards of their Egyptian counterparts in this respect caused them to receive much less attention internationally.[101]

Some in the Syrian opposition viewed the Libyan model as inspiration—combining limited international military intervention in the guise of a humanitarian mission with the creation of a liberated zone within which a transitional government could be created and supported by the international community. For its part, the Syrian regime regarded this scenario as a potential nightmare, one that gained in plausibility as the number of defectors from the Syrian Army increased and as the Syrian opposition more broadly became militarised. Only months after the start of the uprising, preventing a 'Benghazi

scenario' from becoming possible on Syrian territory emerged as a critical priority of the regime, as illustrated by its swift, fierce and disproportionate clampdown and military campaigns focusing on Rastan, Dar'a and Aleppo. This may not by itself demonstrate 'learning', as any regime will oppose the loss of territorial control, Benghazi-style or not, yet the Syrian regime's propagandists have not made it a secret that events in Libya have weighed heavily in its strategic responses to the spread of an armed insurgency.[102]

There is little doubt that the Asad regime has consistently calibrated its repression to reflect its assessment of how the international community—in particular the US and its European allies—would respond to the regime's use of force. In this regard, it is striking that the Syrian regime applied its repression in gradually incremental doses, presumably to deflect arguments drawing parallels between Syria and Libya that might be used to justify creating a no-fly zone in the Syrian case.[103] Accordingly, the regime began to use heavy artillery in the siege of Homs in February 2012. When that failed to trigger an international response, the regime started to rely on its air force to relieve its strained troops, starting with limited helicopter attacks and escalating into fighter jets pounding rebel-held territory. With still no international response, scud missiles and rockets were employed, first in December 2012 against military targets and then in residential areas. Barrel bombs, napalm and cluster bombs followed suit. Then the regime reportedly turned to its chemical weapons, first at a scale sufficiently limited to allow for deniability, and then far more significantly in Ghouta, in the Damascus area, on 21 August 2013. Similarly, in response to fears of a repeat of the Libyan scenario and for Western intervention, the regime adapted its narrative about its own uprising and insurgency. In a speech on 20 June 2011, for example, Asad still likened protesters to 'germs' that existed 'everywhere, on the skin and within the guts'.[104] Similar rhetoric had been used repeatedly by Muammar al-Qaddafi, which helped Western proponents of an armed humanitarian intervention in Libya in making their case. Very likely in response, Asad shifted course. The language of his June speech quickly disappeared. Instead, the regime routinely labelled its opponents as 'terrorists', 'takfiris' and 'al-Qaeda'.

Foreign allies often come to the rescue of authoritarian regimes to offset international pressures or sanctions, primarily by providing financial support, arms and diplomatic cover, and henceforth 'underwrite coercive crackdowns'.[105] Such foreign allies or 'black knights', as Hufbauer (et al.) called them in the more specific context of them helping other states to circumvent or breach international sanctions, have thrown the Syrian regime an essential

lifeline.[106] In particular Iran, Hizballah and Russia variously provided funds, arms and troops, while Russia also lent its political support in international forums, including the UN Security Council. Syria's 'black knights' also provided counter-revolutionary advice, helping the regime formulate and perfect its responses to the uprising/insurgency. The head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Mohammad-Ali Jafari, acknowledged that his force was 'giving intellectual and advisory help and exchanging experiences' with the Syrian regime.[107] The Syrian regime's use of para- or non-state militias in infiltrating and obstructing mass demonstrations showed some similarities with the tactics used by the Iranian Basij militia, although one may suspect that Syria's use of non-state militias in the past provided an endogenous source of inspiration.[108] NDF members, elite troops and security officers are believed to go on stints to Iran where they receive military training.[109] Hizballah fighters are reported to have complemented Iranian advice and training to Syrian regime forces, thanks to their native Arabic language, experience with light infantry combat operations, and expertise in low intensity conflict.[110]

In addition to offering expertise on its military hardware supplies to Syria, Iran may also have introduced the regime to its knowledge of making improvised weaponry and explosives gained by its revolutionary Guards links to militias in Iraq.[111] Iran may also have advised the Syrian regime on how to deal with and circumvent international sanctions.[112] One may also suspect that the Iranian regime's suppression of the Green Movement was part of the 'experience' Jafari said he had shared with his Syrian counterparts. According to US government sources, Iranian law enforcement agents who played a key role in the suppression of the 2009 Green Movement were dispatched to Damascus in early 2011 to give advice and assist the Syrian regime.[113] There are some striking echoes in Syrian regime tactics of some of the methods used by the Iranian regime against protesters in 2009. The Syrian regime's courting of Christian community leaders and its implicit deal-making with Kurdish groups resembles how the Iranian regime took advantage, in 2009, of a disconnect between minority groups in the provinces, including the Kurds, and the Green Movement.[114] Furthermore, Syria's 'Electronic Army' is likely to have been modelled on Iran's 'Web Crime Unit' set up in 2009 to counter Iranian internet activists.

While drawing lessons, support and advice from its foreign allies, the regime has played the regional and international arenas to bolster its power and preserve its position at home. The regime's sectarian narrative on the protests and its efforts to help the uprising mutate into a predominantly jihad-

ist insurgency drew on Iran and Hizballah as it placed the Syrian conflict squarely at a key intersection of a critical regional fault line, real or perceived, setting off Shi'a against Sunni, Shi'a 'resistance' against jihadist–salafism, and Iran against the Arab Gulf powers.[115] Although of course not entirely of the regime's own making, its portrayal of the battle as one raised against jihadist terrorists also resonated in Moscow, as Russia had its own experiences with radical Islamists and indeed still faces a restless northern Caucasus. It can be safely assumed that in its encounters with Russian policy-makers the Syrian regime underscored these experiences,[116] just as it will have emphasised the risks of Western meddling not so long after Moscow felt duped by the humanitarian mission in Libya that, in its eyes, unjustifiably escalated into a project of regime change.

The rise of jihadist–salafist groups, foremost Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, also undermined any appetite among Western audiences for unambiguously taking sides with the rebels just as it created insurmountable obstacles for Western policy-makers to supply the more secularly oriented rebels of the Free Syrian Army with weapons. Consequently, the momentum for the provision of significant military support or arms to the rebels, with still significant chances remaining to 'manage militarization' until roughly mid-2012, passed virtually unnoticed in a climate of Western policy indecision coated in principal stands favouring peaceful solutions.[117] The momentum failed to re-emerge due to the steady proliferation and preponderance of hard-core Islamist militias which, it was now established, would be sure to benefit from significant and 'lethal' Western aid to the rebels. Later that year, stepped-up efforts by the Friends of Syria group of countries to hold together and underwrite Syrian opposition activists in exile, organised in the Syrian National Council, reached a dead end as activists vied for influence and positions among themselves and, perhaps most importantly, because they were jointly overtaken by the military and violent nature of the struggle within Syria in which they failed to play a significant role. Frustrated by their internal squabbling, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accused the members of the Syrian National Council of being out of touch with their increasingly desperate fellow countrymen in Syria.[118] The broader and more inclusive Syrian National Coalition, established in December 2012, met a similar fate, prompting Asad to echo Clinton's remarks when he dismissed it as a gathering of disjointed exiles spending their time abroad in luxury hotels.[119] The tables appeared to have decisively turned when, in January 2014, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal al-Muqdad gleefully stated that several European intelligence agencies had approached the regime to cooperate

on the challenges posed by Islamist extremists, primarily out of concern that a significant number of European volunteers had joined the ranks of the jihadist rebels.[120] Apparently, Asad's remarks a few months earlier had begun to resonate in Western capitals: 'This is also about your interests. Do you really want a backyard that is filled with al-Qaida? When you support instability here? After two and a half years, you should rethink your policies.'[121]

Meanwhile, the Syrian regime has repeatedly threatened its direct neighbours that a much-feared cross-border spill-over of violence from Syria would be the consequence of their own policies and those of the West. At an early stage of the crisis, Asad warned that Western action against his regime would 'cause an earthquake' that would 'burn the whole region'.[122] Ever since, the regime has sent ample reminders that a full-blown regional spill-over is conceivable, as some of its Lebanese critics were assassinated, pro-regime combatants clashed with anti-regime forces primarily in Tripoli, devastating bomb attacks in the same city and in Turkish border towns were mostly likely planted by Syrian regime agents, Syrian warplanes routinely bombed Lebanese border villages, and Syrian refugees arriving in Jordan were infiltrated by intelligence officers. Repeatedly, the Syrian regime warned the Jordanian government that any opening of a southern front by supporting rebels from Jordanian soil—a scenario reportedly called for by Saudi Arabia—would have serious repercussions. These warnings prompted Jordanian officials to send assurances to Damascus that they would not allow this to happen.[123] For its part, Israel was reminded of its vested interest in regime survival in Damascus in order to preserve stability in the Golan, as several security incidents and the occasional stray shell landing in Israeli-occupied territory forebode much worse instability at the border if the regime were to lose control entirely. The regime has been careful not to respond to several Israeli air raids—in January, May and October 2013—surely because it cannot afford an additional front, but also because it prefers to encourage Israel's de facto complicity in regime survival by presenting itself as the only likely partner, if not in peace then certainly in stability. Meanwhile, Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, approaching 3 million in September 2014 and still rising in numbers, and the burden they place on local economies and host countries' stability, form a reminder of the regional stakes of the regime's endgame, if indeed the conflict ever reaches that stage. Against this background, the regime appears to be suggesting that the refugee crisis will only see signs of abating if it wins terrain off the rebels and restores its control in Syria.[124] That may seem implausible, but host countries may at some point be compelled to subscribe to this logic,

and hence inadvertently develop a further interest in the regime's survival, as no better solutions are likely to present themselves. Yet, in all, the much-feared, full-blown regional war over the regime's fate is still to commence outside Syria, despite its ability to bring violence and instability right at the heart of its neighbours' capitals. For now, the regime seems content with leaving much of the 'spill-over' excesses to its opponents, as in June 2014 ISIS proclaimed its 'Islamic state' in Iraq, jihadist–salafists carried out attacks in Lebanon, and Jordanian security agencies fear the same could happen in Jordan. It is as if the regime realised that when or if the regional fallout materialises unequivocally, and this will be ascribed to the regime's deliberate actions, it will lose its effect of deterrence and, hence, stop imposing the relative restraint on those considering full support to the rebels or intervening otherwise. Indeed, in the wake of ISIS's dramatic gains in Iraq, the regime has been increasingly successful in presenting itself to its neighbours and the West alike as an indispensable partner in joint efforts to counter ISIS.

The regime's poker game extends to the international level as it managed to reverse a series of serious initial setbacks by re-imposing itself as the sole representative of Syrian state sovereignty. On the one hand, and illustrated by a UN General Assembly resolution 66/253, adopted in August 2012 by a recorded vote of 133 countries in favour, 12 against and with 31 abstentions, the regime's degree of international isolation rivals that of South Africa during apartheid.[125] The resolution, like subsequent General Assembly resolutions in June and December 2013, lambasted and 'expressed outrage' at the regime's human rights atrocities and its use of heavy weaponry against civilians. In December 2012, a 'Friends of Syria' conference held in Marrakech drew representatives of 130 countries. It concluded that 'Bashar Al Assad had lost legitimacy to govern Syria', and participants recognised the Syrian National Coalition as 'the legitimate representative of the Syrian people', one step short of sovereign state recognition.[126] Despite all these pressures, in addition to ever more intrusive US and European sanctions since May 2011, the regime did not budge. Of course, it was largely able to ignore the pressures as Russia and China repeatedly prevented the UN Security Council from taking any action or agreeing on penalties, using their veto power. The regime undertook frantic lobbying efforts with non-permanent members of the Security Council, including Argentina, Brazil, Azerbaijan, Guatemala, South Africa and India.[127] Delegations and journalists from these countries were invited to Damascus, or they were approached by Syrian ambassadors and pro-regime 'Syria solidarity' groups overseas and led by expatriates. More generally, the regime fell back on its default position in

foreign policy whenever it was confronted by seemingly intractable challenges: sit out the crisis and wait, as Asad put it, for 'the actual situation' to help rehabilitate the regime's international standing.[128]

At the time of writing, it is already becoming increasingly clear that, from the regime's perspective, it has been worth the wait. In yet another macabre paradox of the Syrian conflict, the first milestone toward the regime's international rehabilitation was laid by, what most agree, its own use of chemical weapons in Ghouta on 21 August 2013. The regime may have misjudged the risk that using chemical weapons would bring the US and some of its allies dangerously close to carrying out military strikes. However, from the regime's perspective, it may simply have been worth taking the risk, since rebels in the suburbs of Damascus had closed in on a large military complex on Mount Qasioun, which forms a critical line of defence for downtown Damascus and the presidential palace on Mount Mezzeh. In any case, despite a barrage of international condemnation and US threats to carry out air strikes, the regime quickly turned the tables by allowing UN inspectors to dismantle its stocks of chemical weapons, most likely following Russian suggestions. From Asad's perspective, the deal had numerous pay-offs. Most immediately, it removed the threat of US strikes which, even if limited in scale, were likely to target the same military installations on Mount Qasioun, the position of the regime's Fourth Division from which the rockets with chemical agents were probably fired.[129] Since military strikes had been considered as an option in Washington and then called off, they were unlikely to recur on US decision-makers' minds in the near future. Even more importantly, the chemical weapons deal turned Syria's status from an international pariah into that of a vital partner state in an unprecedented experiment in countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction under the Chemical Weapons Convention. Finally, a welcome by-product of the international efforts to get Syria's chemical stockpiles safely out of the country was that the international community now gained a strong interest in, and appeared implicitly to endorse, the regime's military efforts to regain control over the main roads comprising the strategic 300-kilometre corridor from Damascus via Homs to Latakia, where chemical agents and equipment was shipped away.

A second milestone on the steady road to the regime's formal international rehabilitation resulted from the ill-fated rounds of talks between the regime and the opposition's National Coalition in Montreux and Geneva, held in January 2014. Asad embraced the idea of an international conference, called Geneva II, to discuss a 'transition' in Syria only when circumstances had

become least conducive for it to produce any real results. He initially counted on the opposition's refusal to attend the conference, waited for Russian–US disagreement on what the envisaged transition would entail, and trusted that Washington would refuse to give Iran a seat at the conference table. As a result, during the long run-up to the conference, the opposition—not Asad—stood accused of obstinacy. After being arm-twisted by its Western allies to attend the talks, the National Coalition presented a maximalist scenario for what it perceived as a meaningful transition process, which the regime rejected outright. With expectations about the results of the talks being played down even by the US, their most enthusiastic sponsor, the regime easily turned the conference into a platform to present its willingness to help address the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. Eager to show at least some results, and unable to withstand the moral imperative of the regime's humanitarian bid, the conference's main sponsors and UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi concentrated on efforts to get the conflicting parties to agree on a humanitarian deal for the besieged city of Homs while expressing hope that this could be emulated in other parts of Syria. Consequently, and in a matter of days, the regime had effectively relegated the Geneva I Communiqué of June 2012, which stipulated some general but explicit guidelines toward an envisaged transition in Syria, to the dustbin of history. What is more, the deal on Homs comprised some commitments by the regime to allow for an exodus of 'innocent civilians' from the old city centre and provide those staying with some aid, instead of forcing it to accept permanent humanitarian access to deliver essential assistance to them inside, to which it is obliged under international humanitarian law. That formula, as some Syrian opposition activists argued without anyone listening, played into the hands of the regime as the latter has taken every conceivable step to forcibly displace or eradicate the rebels' popular support base, including by emptying rebel-held areas of its citizens.[130] All the same, the regime embarked on its new role as the international community's partner in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Syria, much of it of its own making.

Syria's counter-revolution revisited

A number of scholars have variously diagnosed authoritarianism and authoritarian regimes generally as inherently injudicious, myopic, foolhardy, dysfunctional or deeply irrational.[131] It appears that Middle Eastern dictators have received more than their fair share in this taxonomy of foolish authoritarian governance and irrational decision-making. Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser, the

Shah of Iran, Libya's Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi, and Iraq's Saddam Hussein—they all top the list of authoritarian leaders who, due to their own purported irrationality and 'detachment' from reality, in one way or another created the conditions of their own demise or defeat. From this perspective, the Syrian regime is merely the latest example in a series of 'stupid' dictatorships that, sooner or later, will crumble or collapse. Yet in the course of three years of unprecedented and seemingly intractable challenges to its very survival, the Syrian regime developed and applied an array of tactics and strategies, which suggest that such assessments are inaccurate and their predictions premature at best: the regime's diagnoses of the roots of the uprising do not come across as exceptionally erroneous; its key decisions, including its heavy reliance on brutal repression, are far from irrational; it has been responsive and it adjusted its policies when it had to; it has come up with ways to address the unintended effects of its actions; it understood the importance of how challengers framed their cause and took effective actions to undercut their narratives; and on all these fronts it showed signs of 'learning' from its own mistakes and those of others. Analyses arguing that the regime's good fortunes, at least until early 2015, can be solely attributed to massive support from Russia, Iran and Hizballah[132] underplay the regime's own adaptability and, more specifically, its role in obtaining such foreign support and utilising it to optimal effect. In short, the Syrian regime calculatingly embarked on a counter-revolutionary campaign that first helped to transform a largely peaceful uprising into an insurgency, and then derailed the latter so that all that remained was a vicious civil war in which it stood better chance of surviving.

This is not to deny that the regime has suffered major setbacks and losses, some of which could have been prevented or mitigated if it had responded differently. By taking issue with the notion of the 'irrational and incompetent tyrant', there is a risk of over-rating the regime's capabilities, effectiveness and efficiency. Among the regime's flaws, derived from its own actions and policies, is almost surely the regime's preoccupation in the near future with struggling to contain the jihadist–salafist phenomenon that it helped to bolster, and most likely facing challenges from the plethora of non-state militias it established, especially if or when the common threat of an armed insurgency recedes. Yet from the regime's perspective, and in terms of Asad's professed inclination to put all his policies at the service of the regime's mere survival, the damage to itself and the country as a whole has been worth it.[133] Even when some analysts keep expressing hopes to the contrary, there are no immediate reasons to believe that the regime's proven responsiveness and adaptabil-

ity will not provide some answers to these and other challenges ahead. That in itself should not be read as a prediction of the regime’s survival, as growing cooperation among Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia sponsoring various rebel groups may cause the insurgents to overcome the regime’s resilience.

Acknowledging and dissecting the regime’s responsiveness is not to suggest that its counter-revolutionary tactics and actions are to be viewed as originating from a master plan drawn up and then purposely implemented.[134] ‘Trial and error’ probably better describes the regime’s responses and how these came about. Although this should be further explored and corroborated in further research, much of the regime’s decisions and actions appear to have originated in varied and often contradictory impulses and actions of multiple regime incumbents, even when the crisis narrowed its circles. This suggests a degree of collectively generated, ad hoc adaptability that is unmistakably authoritarian, but less susceptible to the risks of tunnel vision and fatal miscalculations typically associated with autocratic discretion.

Much of the ongoing discussion on what the outside world can or should do to stop or contain the bloodshed in Syria has failed to acknowledge, let alone address, the awkward reality of the Syrian regime’s calculativeness, adaptability and responsiveness. Morally blasting the regime for its atrocities, even when fully justified, should not stand in the way of a clear-eyed analysis and assessment of the regime’s resilience that any form of outside intervention would have to reckon with, whether this comprises sanctions, diplomacy, support to the rebels, military strikes, or indeed collaborating with the regime.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: FOR 'GOD, SYRIA, BASHAR AND NOTHING ELSE'?

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36. Michael Kerr, 'More "Hama Rules" or a Democratic Opening from the Tragedy of Syria?' *E-International Relations*, 18 June 2012: http://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/18/more-hama-rules-or-a-democratic-opening-from-the-tragedy-of-syria/Syria: 'Why Power-Sharing is the Best-Case Scenario', *International Business Times*, 17 September 2013: http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/syria-bashar-al-assad-power-sharing-barack-506691
37. http://jihadology.net/2014/06/29/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-the-end-of-sykes-picot/
38. BBC News 15 March 2015: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31897389
39. http://www.thirteen.org/programs/frontline/god-syria-bashar-and-nothing-else/

1. THE GENESIS OF SYRIA'S ALAWI COMMUNITY

1. 'Al-Qaradāwī yaṣif al-'Alawiyyīn bi an-Nuṣayriyyah', *Al-Hadath al-'Arabī*, 31 May 2013, http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/83597
2. Ali Mamouri, 'Shi'a Seminaries Divided on Fatwas for Syrian Jihad', *Al-Monitor*, 29 July 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/syria-jihad-fatwas-shiite-clergy-iran-iraq.html
3. Ibid.
4. This chapter is a revised version of an article published earlier. See Aslam Farouk-Alli, 'Sectarianism in Alawi Syria: Exploring the Paradoxes of Politics and Religion', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2014): 207–26.
5. For one of the best accounts of the emergence and crystallisation of the Sunni and Shi'a doctrinal schools see Bashīr Mūsa Nāfi', *al-'Irāq—Siyāqāt al-Waḥdah wa al-Inqisām* (Cairo: Dār ash-Shurūq, 2006), pp. 15–118.
6. Hence the name Shi'a, a contraction of the phrase *shi'atu Ali* (Ali's party or supporters). A critical analysis of this episode in Islamic history is provided by Hishām Ja'īṭ, *al-Fitnah—Jadalīyyah ad-Dīn wa as-Siyāsah fī al-Islām al-Mubakkir* (Beirut: Dār aṭ-ṭalī'ah, 1991). The best English source work is Wilfred Madelung, *The Succession*

to Muḥammad—A study of the early Caliphate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

7. Bashīr Mūsa Nāfi', *al-'Irāq—Siyāqāt al-Waḥdah wa al-Inqisām*, pp. 15–34.
8. Ibid., pp. 34–47.
9. al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsa an-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq ash-Shī'ah*, ed.'Abd al-Mun'im al-ḥifnī (Cairo: Dār ar-Rashād, 1992).
10. In early works of heresiography the sect is sometimes also referred to as *an-Namiriyyah*. See al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsa an-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq ash-Shī'ah*, pp. 95–104.
11. M. O. H. Ursinus, 'Millet', in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn, vol. 8 (NED-SAM) (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 61–4.
12. For detailed elaboration on the Nuṣayrī religion see chapter two in: Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayrī-'Alawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 67–151.
13. Mahmud A. Faksh, 'The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2 (April 1984), p. 135.
14. Friedman, *The Nusayrī-'Alawīs*, p. 76. Importantly, Friedman does not deny the syncretistic nature of the Alawi faith but adopts an analytic approach that tries to account for both internal and external influences. In this regard, he clearly states: "The existence of Persian, Christian as well as pagan elements, in the Nuṣayrī manuscripts is undeniable, but equally they display internal religious evolution within the Shī'ī Ghulāt of Kufa." p. 70.
15. Faksh, *The Alawi Community of Syria*, p. 135.
16. Friedman, *The Nusayrī-'Alawīs*, p. 82.
17. Faksh, *The Alawi Community of Syria*, p. 135.
18. Ibid., p. 136.
19. For a more comprehensive treatment of the topic see Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofsky, *The Nusayri-'Alawi Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Friedman, *The Nusayrī-'Alawīs*.
20. Sāmī al-Jundī, *al-Ba'th* (Beirut: Dār aṭ-ṭalī'ah, 1969), pp. 144–5.
21. An often-quoted example of such a work is that of an Alawi scholar, who converted to Judaism, then to Islam and then became a Christian Protestant and wrote a book exposing the secrets of the Nusayri (Alawi) creed; see Sulaymān al-Adhanī, *Al-Bākura as-Sulaymānniyah fī kashf Asrār ad-Diyānah an-Nuṣayrīyyah al-'Alawīyyah* (Cairo: Dār aṣ-ṣaḥwah, 1990).
22. In this regard, see Muḥammad Ghālib aṭ-Ṭawīl, *Tārīkh al-'Alawīyyīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalūs, 1979).
23. For a comprehensive summary of the history and evolution of the Alawi faith, see Kais M. Firro, 'The 'Alawīs in Modern Syria: From Nuṣayrīya to Islam via 'Alawīya', *Der Islam*, vol. 82 (2005): pp. 1–31.
24. Ibid., pp. 2–3.
25. Ibid., p. 3

26. H. Halm, 'Nuṣayriyya' in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn, vol. 8 (NED—SAM) (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. 146.
27. Itamar Rabinovich explains that this term was coined by P. Rondot, but was popularised by Albert Hourani. See Itamar Rabinovich, 'The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918–45', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Oct. 1979): 710, endnote 3.
28. Halm, *Nuṣayriyya*, p. 146.
29. Ibid., p. 147.
30. Taqī ad-Dīn Ibn Taymīyyah, *Majmū'ah al-Fatāwa*, eds. 'Āmir al-Jazzār and Anwar al-Bāz (Riyadh: Maktabah al-'Ubaykān, 1997), vol. 18, pp. 89–99.
31. Ibid.
32. See Abū'l Fidā' Ismā'īl Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa an-Nihāyah*, ed. 'Abdallah ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin at-Turkī (Gizah: Hajr Press, 1998), vol. 18, pp. 168–9.
33. Friedman also affirms that Ibn Taymīyyah's *fatwa* was in response to the 1317 rebellion; see Yaron Friedman, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Fatāwā against the Nuṣayrī-'Alawī Sect', *Der Islam*, vol. 82 (2005): 359.
34. Abū'l Fidā' Ismā'īl Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa an-Nihāyah*, vol. 18, pp. 168–9.
35. The book has been widely translated. For the original Arabic version see Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭah al-Musamā'ah Tuḥfat an-Nuẓẓār fī Gharā'ib al-Amṣār wa 'Ajā'ib al-Asfār*, ed. Darwīsh al-Jūwaydī (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Aṣrīyyah, 2010).
36. Hanna Batatu, 'Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling Military Group and the Causes for its Dominance,' *Middle East Journal*, vol. 35, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 333.
37. Ibid., p. 334.
38. Yvette Talhamy, 'The *Fatwas* and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2010): 181.
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41. Yvette Talhamy, 'The Nusayri and Druze Minorities in Syria in the Nineteenth Century: The Revolt against the Egyptian Occupation as a Case Study', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 48, no. 6 (2012): 973–95.
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43. Yvette Talhamy, 'Conscription amongst the Nusayri ('Alawis) in the Nineteenth Century', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Apr. 2011): 29.
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45. Yvette Talhamy, 'The Nusayri Leader Isma'il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854–58)', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 44, no. 6 (Nov. 2008): 895–908.
46. Ibid., p. 897.
47. Ibid., p. 904.
48. Zeine N. Zeine, *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Caravan Books, 1973), p. 21.

49. Yvette Talhamy, 'American Protestant Missionary Activity among the Nusayris (Alawis) in Syria in the Nineteenth Century', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2 (Mar. 2011): 215.
50. Ibid., p. 219.
51. Ibid., p. 226.
52. Ibid., p. 232.
53. William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, C): Westview Press, 1994), p. 157.
54. Roxanne L. Euben, 'Contingent Borders, Syncretic Perspectives: Globalization, Political Theory and Islamizing Knowledge', *International Studies Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2002): 246.
55. For a critical analysis of this period, see Christopher M. Andrew and Alexander S. Kanya-Forstner, *The Climax of French Imperial Expansion, 1914—1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1981).
56. For further elaboration, see Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 13–51.
57. Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (London: Hurst, 2001), p. 4.
58. Ibid., pp. 4–5.
59. For one of the best studies on the Revolt, see Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
60. See Albert Hourani, 'Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Nobles', in Albert Hourani, Philip Khoury and Mary C. Wilson (eds), *The Modern Middle East*, 2nd edn (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 83–109.
61. Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).
62. Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism*, p. 13.
63. Faksh, *The Alawi Community of Syria*, pp. 137–8.
64. For further details, see Itamar Rabinovich, 'The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918–45', pp. 707–9.
65. Faksh, *The Alawi Community of Syria*, p. 139.
66. See Gitta Yaffe-Schatzmann, 'Alawi Separatists and Unionists: The Events of 25 February 1936', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Jan. 1995): 29.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., p. 34
69. Ibid., pp. 30–1.
70. Some of the activities and manifestos issued in these gatherings are captured in a work originally published in 1946 by one of the participants; see Munīr Al-Sharīf, *Al-Muslimūn al-'Alawīyūn: Man Hum wa Ayna Hum?* revised edn (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Balāgh, 1994).
71. Gitta Yaffe-Schatzmann, 'Alawi Separatists and Unionists: The Events of 25 February 1936', pp. 35–7.

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73. ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Khayr, ‘Yaqẓat al-Muslimīn al-‘Alawīyīn’, quoted in Kais M. Firro, ‘The ‘Alawīs in Modern Syria: From Nuṣayrīya to Islam via ‘Alawīya’, p. 26.
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82. Raymond Hinnebusch, ‘Modern Syrian Politics’, *History Compass*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2008): 265.
83. Patrick Seale’s brilliant study is the standard reference work on this period: Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).
84. The dearth of research on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has recently been filled by an important study; see Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (London: Hurst, 2013).
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86. Bashīr Mūsa Nāfi’, *al-Islāmiyūn* (Beirut: ad-Dār al-‘Arabīyyah li’l-‘Ulūm, 2010), pp. 149–50.
87. Ibid.
88. Raymond Hinnebusch, *Modern Syrian Politics*, p. 267.
89. The most detailed study on the Alawi rise to power is still Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba’th Party*, revised 4th edn (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).
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91. Ibid., p. 141.
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95. Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition*, pp. 6–7.
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97. Hinnebusch, *Modern Syrian Politics*, p. 266.
98. Faksh, *The Alawi Community of Syria*, p. 146.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
101. Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 69.
102. Ibid.
103. Hinnebusch, *Modern Syrian Politics*, p. 269.
104. Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition*, p. 213.
105. Hinnebusch, *Modern Syrian Politics*, p. 269.
106. Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 341.
107. Ibid.
108. Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition,* p. 207.
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115. Bashīr Mūsa Nāfi', *al-Islāmiyūn*, pp. 149–50.
116. Talhamy, 'The *Fatwas* and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', pp. 189–90.
117. Bashīr Mūsa Nāfi', *al-Islāmiyūn*, p. 153.
118. Ibid., p. 174.
119. Ibid.
120. Zisser, *Hafiz al-Asad Discovers Islam*, p. 50.
121. Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 455.
122. Hinnebusch, *Modern Syrian Politics*, p. 274.
123. For a detailed account of the transition see David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).
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125. For more details, see Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003).
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128. 'Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad', in *Wall Street Journal*, 30 January 2011, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894
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130. As Charles Taylor explains, the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is an expression of the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings and is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society; it is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy. For more details see Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

2. THE ALAWIS IN THE OTTOMAN PERIOD

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3. Jean Sauvaget, 'Décrets Mamelouks de Syrie (III)', *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales* 12 (1947–8): 48–9; Robert Mantran and Jean Sauvaget, *Règlements fiscaux ottomans: les provinces syriennes* (Beirut: Institut Français de Damas, 1951), p. 76.
4. Başbakanlık Ottoman Archives (BOA), Istanbul: *Tahrir Defteri* 68, pp. 5–6, transliterated in Ahmet Akgündüz (ed.), *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri ve Hukukî Tahlilleri* 3 (Istanbul: FEY Vakfı/Osmanlı Araştırmaları Vakfı, 1990–96), pp. 499–501.
5. *Tahrir Defteri* 1107:9, transliterated in Akgündüz, *Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri*, 7:83.
6. *Tahrir Defteri* 68:241, 243; 1017:274.
7. *Tahrir Defteri*, 68:316–21, 329, 332, 334.
8. Samuel Lyde, *The Asian Mystery: Illustrated in the History, Religion and Present State of the Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1860), pp. 50–4; see also Muhammad Ghalib al-Tawil, *Tarikh al-'Alawiyyin*, 3rd edn (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1979), pp. 420–8.
9. *Tahrir Defteri*, 1107: 291b-296a, 314b.
10. Ibid., 311b, 315a-316b.
11. BOA, *Şam-ı Şerif Ahkam Defteri* 3:157.
12. BOA, *Mühimme Defteri* 52:210.
13. Dick Douwes, 'Knowledge and Oppression: The Nusayriyya in the Late Ottoman Period', in *La Shi'a nell'Impero Ottomano* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1993), pp. 163–4.

14. See Qasr Nawfal, Tripoli: Tripoli Court Records 1:5; 5:18; 7:67, 106.
15. Tripoli 3:69, 173, 191; 5:18.
16. Tripoli 7:257, 326.
17. Tripoli 10:163–4, 246; 11:54.
18. Mühimme 3:352; 6:276; 23:117; 46:164.
19. Tripoli 4/2:60.
20. Tripoli 6:125.
21. Milli Kütüphane, Ankara: Antioch Court Records 2:5–6.
22. Tripoli 1:17.
23. Tripoli 4/2:67; Stefan Winter, 'Les Kurdes du Nord-Ouest syrien et l'Etat ottoman, 1690–1750', in Mohammad Afifi et al. (eds), *Sociétés rurales ottomanes* (Cairo: IFAO, 2005), pp. 252–7.
24. Tripoli 4/2:61–2.
25. See Antoine Abdel Nour, *Introduction à l'histoire urbaine de la Syrie ottomane (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1982), pp. 77–8.
26. Şam-ı Şerif Ahkam 2:5–6, 22.
27. Tripoli 14:212; 15:303–4.
28. Tripoli 4/2:68; 15:303.
29. Tripoli 1:18–19.
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31. Tannus al-Shidyaq, *Akhbar al-A'yan fi Jabal Lubnan* (Beirut: Université Libanaise, 1970), pp. 346, 372.
32. Tripoli 30:200.
33. Samuel Lyde, *The Asian Mystery: Illustrated in the History, Religion and Present State of the Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria*, p. 196; Yvette Talhamy, 'The *Fatwa*s and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle East Studies* 46 (2010): 183–4.
34. Stefan Winter, 'La révolte alaouite de 1834 contre l'occupation égyptienne: perceptions alaouites et lecture ottomane', *Oriente Moderno* 69 (1999): 60–71.
35. Stefan Winter, 'The Nusayris before the Tanzimat in the Eyes of Ottoman Provincial Administrators, 1804–1834', in Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann (eds), *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2004), pp. 97–112; Necati Alkan, 'Fighting for the Nusayri Soul: State, Protestant Missionaries and the Alawis in the Late Ottoman Empire', *Die Welt des Islams* 52 (2012): 23–50. Unlike for earlier periods, nineteenth-century Ottoman archival documents on the Alawis are now largely accessible by online catalogue or have been published; see Rıza Ayhan et al. (eds), *Osmanlı Arşiv Belgelerinde Nusayrîler ve Nusayrîlik (1745–1920)* (Ankara: Gazi Üniversitesi Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Velî Araştırma Merkezi, 2010).
36. See now especially Nevin Yazıcı, 'Suriye'de Azınlık İktidarı: Nusayriler', in Ümit Özdağ, *Küçük Orta Doğu Suriye* (Ankara: Kripto, 2012), pp. 368–75.
37. Fadi Azzam, *Sarmada*, translated by Adam Talib (London: Arabia Books, 2012), p. 142.

3. COMMUNITY, SECT, NATION: COLONIAL AND SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSES ON THE ALAWIS IN SYRIA DURING THE MANDATE AND EARLY INDEPENDENCE PERIODS

1. This problematic is dealt with at greater length in Max Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shiʿism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 6–19.
2. The critical study of difference and diversity in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman world has been a cornerstone of the historiography for at least a generation: Aron Rodrigue, 'Difference and Tolerance in the Ottoman Empire: Interview By Nancy Reynolds', *Stanford Humanities Review*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1995): 81–90; idem, 'From Millet to Minority: Turkish Jewry', in Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (eds), *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 238–61. For more recent work on the construction of 'minority' as a concept and 'minorities' as sociological communities, see Jordi Tejel, 'Repenser les nationalismes «minoritaires»: le nationalisme kurde en Irak et en Syrie durant la période des mandats (entre tradition et modernité)', *A Contrario* 11 (March 2009): 151–73; Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Anh Nga Longva and Anne Sofie Roald (eds), *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).
3. For critical thinking on the topic, see Nikolaos Van Dam, 'Middle Eastern Political Clichés: "Takriti" and "Sunni" Rule in Iraq; "Alawi" Rule in Syria, a Critical Appraisal', *Orient*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1980): 42–57; Sami Zubaida, 'The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2 (May 2002): 205–15. The foundational work is, of course, Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
4. Talal Asad, 'Responses', in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (eds), *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 224.
5. A discussion of the multiple genealogies of secularism in the intellectual history of the modern Arab world is beyond the scope of this chapter. For starters, see Philip S. Khoury, 'Islamic Revival and the Crisis of the Secular State in the Arab World', in Ibrahim Ibrahim (ed.), *Arab Resources: The Transformation of a Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 213–36; Nikki Keddie, 'Secularism and the State: Towards Clarity and Global Comparison', *New Left Review* 226 (1997): 21–40; Nazik Saba Yarid, *Secularism and the Arab World: 1850–1939* (London: Saqi Books, 2002; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Laïcités autoritaires en terres d'islam* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

6. The literature on French North Africa and 'Françafrique' is vast. On Algeria, see, for example, Allen Christelow, *Muslim Law Courts and the French Colonial State in Algeria* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Julia Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algerian and Tunisia, 1800–1904)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); Patricia M. E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995). For West Africa, see Robert Launay and Benjamin F. Soares, 'The Formation of an "Islamic Sphere" in French Colonial West Africa', *Economy and Society*, vol. 28, no. 4 (1999): 497–519; David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920* (Athens and Oxford: Ohio University Press and James Currey, 2000).
7. On sectarianist discourse (a term he doesn't use) regarding the Druze community in late Ottoman and Mandate-era southern Syria, see Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 16–17.
8. Gitta Yaffe-Schatzmann, 'Alawi Separatists and Unionists: The Events of 25 February 1936', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Jan. 1995): 28. It was through such French-backed initiatives that Sulayman al-Asad, father of Hafez al-Asad, would (in)famously join a group of elites and large landowners in calling for the enhanced autonomy of the Alawi province.
9. Jacques Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites* (Tours: Arrault, 1940), p. 52. See too Sabrina Mervin, 'L'«entité alaouite», une création française', in Pierre-Jean Luizard (ed.), *Le choc colonial et l'islam: les politiques religieuses des puissances coloniales en terres d'islam* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), pp. 343–58.
10. Hashim Uthman, *Tarikh al-'alawiyyin: waqa'i' wa-ahdath* (History of the 'Alawites: Incidents and Events) (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lami li-l-Matbu'at, 1997), p. 60.
11. Jean-Émile Janot, *Des croisades au mandat. Notes sur le peuple alaouïte* (Lyon: Imprimerie L. Bascou, 1934), p. 37.
12. Chantal Verdeil, 'Une révolution sociale dans la montagne': la conversion des Alaouites par les jésuites dans les années 1930', in Bernard Heyberger and Rémy Madinier (eds), *L'islam des marges: mission chrétienne et espaces périphériques du monde musulman, XVIe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Karthala; IISMM, 2010), pp. 81–105. Yvette Talhamy, 'American Protestant Missionary Activity Among the Nusayris (Alawis) in Syria in the Nineteenth Century', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2 (March 2011): 215–36; Necati Alkan, 'Fighting for the Nusayrī Soul: State, Protestant Missionaries and the 'alawīs in the Late Ottoman Empire', *Die Welt des Islams*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2012): 23–50.
13. Jean-Émile Janot, *Des croisades au mandat. Notes sur le peuple alaouïte* (Lyon: Imprimerie L. Bascou, 1934), p. 96.

14. Peter Gubser, 'Minorities in Power: The Alawites of Syria', in R. D. McLaurin (ed.), *The Political Role of Military Groups in the Middle East* (New York: Praeger, 1979), pp. 17–47; Muhammad Faksh, 'The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1984): 133–53; Daniel Pipes, 'The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4 (1989): 429–50; Fuad I. Khuri, 'The Alawis of Syria: Religious Ideology and Organization', in Richard T. Antoun and Donald Quataert (eds), *Syria: Society, Culture, and Polity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); Leon T. Goldsmith, 'The Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: Alawite 'asabiyya and the Rise and Decline of the Asad Dynasty of Syria', PhD diss., University of Otago, 2012. In the context of the current Syrian conflict, amid some of the most rancorous and sectarianist rhetoric on Syria, more and more voices have arisen to push back against this perspective. See, for example, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, 'The Dangerous Illusion of an Alawite Regime', *Boston Review*, 11 June 2013, https://www.bostonreview.net/blog/dangerous-illusion-alawite-regime, accessed 13 June 2013; and Robin Yassin-Kassab, 'Syria's Communal Tensions are Fuelled by Politics not Theology', *The National*, 11 July 2013, http://www.thenational.ae/thenational-conversation/comment/syrias-communal-tensions-are-fuelled-by-politics-not-theology, accessed 23 July 2013.
15. Yaron Friedman, 'Al-Husayn Ibn Hamdân Al-Khasîbî: A Historical Biography of the Founder of the Nusayrî-'Alawite Sect', *Studia Islamica* 93 (2001): 91–112; Me'ir Mikhael Bar-Asher and Arieh Kofsky, *The Nusayrī-'Alawī Religion: An Enquiry Into Its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002); Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayrī-'Alawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History, and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Bella Tendler, 'Concealment and Revelation: A Study of Secrecy and Initiation Among the Nusayri-'Alawis of Syria', PhD diss., Princeton University, 2012. As opposed to these textualist accounts, Stefan Winter provides a more fine-grained social historical account of the Nusayri–Alawi community in greater Syria during the medieval period in his current book-in-progress. See Winter, 'The Nusayris in Medieval Syria: From Religious Sect to Confessional Community', paper presented at 'Belief and Unbelief: An Interdisciplinary Symposium', Princeton University, April 2013.
16. Dick Douwes, 'Knowledge and Oppression: The Nusayriyya in the Late Ottoman Period', in *Convegno Sul Tema: La Sh'ia Nell'Impero Ottomano (Roma, 15 Aprile 1991)* (Roma: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1993), pp. 149–69; Stefan Winter, 'The Nusayris Before the Tanzimat in the Eyes of Ottoman Provincial Administrators, 1804–1834', in Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann (eds), *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon* (Würzburg: Ergon in Kommission, 2004), pp. 97–112; Kais M. Firro, 'The 'Alawīs in Modern Syria: From Nuṣayrīya to Islam Via 'Alawīya', *Der Islam*, vol. 82, no. 1 (2005): 1–31; Yvette Talhamy, 'The Nusayri Leader Isma'Il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854–58)',

Middle Eastern Studies, vol. 44, no. 6 (2008): 895–908; idem, 'The *Fatwas* and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2010): 175–94; idem, 'Conscription Among the Nusayris ('Alawis) in the Nineteenth Century', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2011): 23–40.

17. Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism, and Tribalism in Politics, 1961–1978* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); Elisabeth Picard, 'Y-a-t-il un problème communautaire en Syrie?' *Maghreb-Machrek* 87 (1980): 7–21; Fabrice Balanche, 'Clientélisme, Communautarisme et Fragmentation Territoriale en Syrie', *A Contrario* 11 (2009): 122–50.
18. Sulayman al-Adhani, *Kitab al-bakura al-sulaymaniyya fi kashf asrar al-diyana al-nusayriyya* (The Sulaymanian First Fruits Revealing the Secrets of the Nusayri Religion) (Beirut, 1863).
19. Samuel Lyde, *The Asian Mystery Illustrated in the History, Religion, and Present State of the Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860). See too Edward Salisbury, 'The Book of Sulyman's First Ripe Fruit Disclosing the Nosairian Religion', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 8 (1864): 227–308.
20. Muhammad Amin Ghalib Tawil, *Tarikh al-ʿalawiyyin* (History of the Alawites) (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 1966 [1924]).
21. Hashim Uthman, *al-ʿAlawiyyun bayna al-ustura wa-l-haqiqa* (The Alawites Between Myth and Truth) (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-A'lami li-l-Matbu'at, 1980); idem, *Hal al-ʿalawiyyun Shi'a? Bahth tarikhi min waqi' wathaʾiqihim wa-adabiyyatihim al-manshura wa-ghayr al-manshura* (Are the Alawites Shi'a? A Historical Study through their Published and Unpublished Documents and Sayings) (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lami li-l-Matbu'at, 1994); idem, *Tarīkh al-ʿalawiyyin*. See too, Abd al-Rahman al-Khayyir, *Lamahat khatifa ʿan al-muslimin al-ʿalawiyyin* (Brief Snapshots of the Alawite Muslims) (Damascus: [s.n.], 1997); Abd al-Rahman a-Khayyir and 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Yahya Aryani, *ʿAqidatuna wa-waqi'una nahnu al-muslimin al-ja'fariyyin (al-ʿalawiyyin)* (Our Creed and our Reality as Ja'fari (Alawi) Muslims) (Damascus: Kutub Dhat Fa'ida, 1996); 'Abd al-Rahman Khayyir and Hani al-Khayyir, *Yaqazat al-muslimin al-ʿalawiyyin fi matla' al-qarn al-ʾishrin* (The Alawite Muslim Awakening at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century) (Damascus: Kutub Dhat Faʾida, 1996).
22. Stéphane Valter, *La construction nationale syrienne: légitimation de la nature communautaire du pouvoir par le discours historique* (Paris: CNRS, 2002).
23. Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites*, p. 10.
24. Élicio Colin, 'Jacques Weulersse (1905–1946)', *Annales de géographie*, vol. 56, no. 301 (1947):53–4.
25. Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites*, p. 9.
26. Izzat Nouss, 'La Population de la république syrienne. Étude démographique et géographique'. PhD diss., La Sorbonne, 1951. To be sure, *Le pays des Alaouites* was

not without its detractors. In an otherwise glowing review, André Cholley took issue with some of the sweeping generalisations made regarding the connection between social structures in the region and long-term historical processes or large-scale political categories. Cholley, 'Le pays des Alaouites, d'après J. Weulersse'. *Annales de géographie*, vol. 54, no. 293 (1945): 53–9.

27. Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites*, p. 12.
28. Ibid., p. 57.
29. Ibid., pp. 45–6. Here Weulersse is probably alluding to another object of French Orientalist attention, namely the 'old man of the mountains', the fourteenth-century 'Grand Master of the Assassins', Rashid al-Din Sinan, who was actually an Isma'ili leader. This was not the only time the Alawis of Greater Syria would be confused with Isma'ilis. See Yaron Friedman, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Fatāwā Against the Nusayrī-'Alawī Sect', *Der Islam*, vol. 82, no. 2 (2005): 349–63.
30. Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites*, p. 46.
31. Ibid., p. 58. This is altogether unlike the titillating rumour-mongering of ritualized promiscuity—ostensibly indicative of loose and louche morals within the Alawi community—bandied about by French and other observers. See, for example, Jehan Cendrieux, *Al-Ghâdir, ou, le sexe-dieu: roman syrien* (Paris: Charpentier, 1926).
32. Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites*, pp. 119–20.
33. Ibid., p. 120.
34. Ibid., pp. 122–3.
35. Ibid., p. 123.
36. Louis Massignon, 'Les "Noseïris" de Syrie', *Revue du monde musulman* 38 (1920): 271–80.
37. Munir Mushabik Mousa, 'Étude sociologique des 'Alaouites ou Nusaïris', PhD diss., La Sorbonne (1958), pp. 2–3. Almost simultaneously, Mousa published a multi-volume introduction to sociology: *al-Mutawwal fi al-susiyulujiya ('Ilm al-ijtima')* (An Extended Survey of Sociology) (Damascus, 1959).
38. Mousa, 'Étude sociologique des 'Alaouites ou Nuṣaïris', p. 26.
39. Ibid., pp. 79–81.
40. Ibid., p. 92.
41. Ibid., p. 918.
42. Ibid., p. 924.
43. Ibid., p. 93.
44. Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites*, p. 73.
45. Louis Massignon, 'Les Nusayris', in *L'elaboration de l'Islam. Colloque de Strasbourg,* 12–13–14 juin 1959 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1961), p. 113.
46. Etienne de Vaumas, 'Le Djebel Ansarieh: Etudes de géographie humaine', *Revue de géographie alpine*, vol. 48, no. 2 (1960): 278.
47. Ibid., p. 306.

48. Ibid., p. 279.
49. Ibid., p. 305.
50. Ibid., p. 308.
51. Ibid., p. 309.
52. Ibid., p. 310.
53. Ibid., pp. 309–10.
54. Edmund Burke III, 'The Sociology of Islam: The French Tradition', in Edmund Burke and David Prochaska (eds), *Genealogies of Orientalism: History, Theory, Politics* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p. 155.

4. 'GO TO DAMASCUS, MY SON': ALAWI DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS UNDER BA'ATH PARTY RULE

1. Fabrice Balanche, 'L'Etat au Proche-Orient arabe entre communautarisme, clientélisme, mondialisation et projet de Grand Moyen Orient', *L'Espace Politique*, 11 (2010), http://espacepolitique.revues.org/index1619.html
2. Michel Seurat, *l'Etat de Barbarie* (Paris: PUF, 2012).
3. According to my estimations, derived from Syrian census data and the cartography of religious communities in Syria, the Syrian population in 2010 was divided proportionately into: Arab Sunnis (65 percent), Kurds (15 percent), Alawis (10 percent), Druze (3 percent), Ismai'lis (1 percent), Twelver Shi'a (1 percent) and Christians including Armenians (5 percent).
4. Fabrice Balanche, 'Géographie de la révolte syrienne', *Outre Terre* 27 (Sept. 2011).
5. Demonstrations took place all over Syria, including in Salamyeh, an Isma'ili town, and Sweida, the Druze city. These demonstrations were, however, small in size and had at their core real political (as opposed to communal) demands as a result of the strong presence of the leftist opposition to the Asad regime in these areas. Conversely, Alawi towns and quarters remained calm.
6. 'Die Slowly, Christian Dog', *The Spectator*, 27 October 2012: http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/8708121/die-slowly-christian-dog/
7. Ayse Tekdal Fildis, 'Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 148–56.
8. Most of the civilian massacres have been limited to Sunni and Alawi-majority territories: in the spring of 2012, in Sunni-majority Houla (108 killed) and Mazraa Qoubeyr (80 killed). Hala Kodmani, 'Syrie: Nous, alaouites, allons être tués deux fois', *Libération*, 28 September 2012, http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2012/09/28/syrie-nous-alaouites-allons-etre-tues-deux-fois_849694. Georges Malbrunot 'En Syrie, Homs au bord de la guerre civile', *Le Figaro*, 8 November 2011; 'Houla: How a massacre unfolded', BBC, 8 June 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18233934
9. Abdel Nour Antoine, 'Le réseau routier de la Syrie ottomane (XVI-XVIIIème)', *Arabica* XXX (1983), pp. 169–89.

10. Still to this day Alawis constitute a significant minority in this region, forming a quarter of the population of Homs in 2011; see Fabrice Balanche, 'Géographie de la révolte syrienne'.
11. Jacques Weulersse, 'Ces attardés de l'Histoire', *Le pays des alaouites* (Tours: Arrault, 1940), p. 377.
12. Dreykish, to the south of the Alawi mountains, was the most significant Alawi settlement, with only 2,000 inhabitants.
13. 1947 census. Central Bureau of Statistics, Damascus.
14. 1.2 percent Isma'ili.
15. Jacques Weulersse, 'Les Alaouites', *La France méditerranéenne et africaine* 2 (1938): 56.
16. Munir Mushbek Mousa, 'Etude sociologique des Alaouites ou Nusaïris', Masters dissertation, La Sorbonne, 1958, p. 784.
17. Jacques Weulersse, *Le Pays des alaouites*.
18. Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
19. Census 1947.
20. Initiated in 1958 with the Agricultural Relations Law, these were halted in 1961 for reasons including opposition from large landowners and crop failure due to drought between 1958 and 1961.
21. Françoise et Jean Métral, 'Maitrise de l'eau et société dans la plaine du Ghab', *Revue de Géographie de Lyon* 3 (1979).
22. Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien* (Paris: Karthala, 2006), p. 273.
23. These names have rural connotations; El Armen was initially a quarter populated by Armenian refugees with whom the Alawis share a long history of cohabitation.
24. Alain Chouet, 'L'espace tribal alaouite à l'épreuve du pouvoir', *Maghreb-Machrek* 147 (Jan.-Mar. 1995): p. 105. Alawis represent 70 percent of the population of Tartous, 55 percent of Latakia and 65 percent of Baniyas and Jableh. The mountain towns of Dreykish, Sheikh Bader and Qardaha are almost 100 percent Alawi; Safita is mixed Alawi and Christian, while Haffeh remains predominantly Sunni. In 1993, Haffeh was inhabited by 911 Sunni Muslims, 342 Christians and 15 Alawis. In 1994, according to the town's civil register, there were 8,603 Muslims (including Sunnis and Alawis) and 1,002 Christians.
25. Projection based on the Censuses of 1981, 1994 and 2004, Fabrice Balanche.
26. The Mohafaza is the most important administrative unit in the Syrian system. The Mohafaza is directed by a Mohafez (governor), a high-level civil servant, appointed by the president whom he represents in the governorate. The Mohafez takes initiatives concerning the administration of the territory and its economic development, at the same time being responsible for maintaining public order. In every Mohafaza, the state ministries and government agencies have local departments

and these create thousands of jobs and give the town real political and economic importance.

27. Since its creation, the port of Tartus specialised in the transport of heavy goods (potash, iron, cement etc.), but its proximity to Damascus and Homs soon attracted container ships which had previously been destined for Latakia. Latakia remains better equipped than Tartus for the transhipment of containers.
28. After the transfer of the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey in 1939, tens of thousands of people left the region to settle in Syria. The Alawi community of the Sanjak was much more urbanised than its counterpart in Syria. It comprised a significant intellectual elite, among them Wahib Ghanem and Zaki Harzouzi, two of the founders of the Ba'ath Party, who moved and settled in Aleppo and Damascus.
29. Estimate based on the censuses of 1960, 1970 and 1981. Central Bureau of Statistics, Damascus.
30. The Alawi population is more than 500,000 people, according to the author's estimations.
31. While never officially recorded, this phrase is attributed to Hafez al-Asad and was repeated by Syrian Army officers in interviews conducted by the author.
32. Author's interviews during fieldwork on the urban agglomerations of Damascus, 2003–8.
33. Alasdair Drysdale, 'Center and Peripheries in Syria. A political geography study', p. 199.
34. Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien*, p. 164.
35. Ibid., p. 165; and Noujoud Allouch, 'La péri-urbanisation de Lattaquié', PhD diss. (2000), p. 239.
36. Noujoud Allouch, 'La péri-urbanisation de Lattaquié', p. 266.
37. According to several qualitative inquiries conducted between 2000 and 2013, the author noticed massive recruitment of Alawis into the public sector at Latakia. These results have been confirmed by the thesis of Noujoud Allouch: he records figures on the distribution of the workforce (male and female working population) in the Alawi quarters of the Latakia periphery: 64.9 percent in the public sector, 11.5 percent in the non-agricultural private sector, 9 percent in agriculture, and 14.6 percent without a job. Allouche Noujoud Allouch, 'La péri-urbanisation de Lattaquié', p. 266.
38. Syrian census, 2004.
39. Fabrice Balanche, *La région alaouite et le pouvoir syrien*, p. 165.
40. A quarter of the secondary schools opened in Syria between 1963 and 1970 were in the coastal region; see Alasdair Drysdale, 'Center and Peripheries in Syria. A political geography study', PhD dissertation (University of Michigan, Chicago, 1997), p. 260.
41. Syrian census, 1960.

42. Syrian census, 2004.
43. Syrian census, 1981.
44. Between 1981 and 2004 the national average doubled from 1.6 percent to 3.7 percent.
45. Syrian census, 2004.
46. Fabrice Balanche, *Atlas du Proche-Orient Arabe* (Paris: PUPS, 2011), p. 56. Of the student body at the University of Latakia in 2009, 54.3 percent were women compared with a national average of 51 percent. See *Statistical Yearbook 2010* (Damascus: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011).
47. Youssef Courbage and Todd Emmanuel, *Le rendez-vous des civilistions* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), p. 56.
48. And also the Druze and Christian communities.
49. In 1935, the population of Baniyas was 2,157 (1,671 Sunni, 350 Christian and 136 Alawi); Jacques Weulersse, 'Les Alaouites', p. 56.
50. Although this figure has no doubt been exaggerated to bolster the significance of the community in the city, Alawis can nevertheless be said to have come to constitute the majority community; see Alain Chouet, 'L'espace tribal alaouite à l'épreuve du pouvoir', *Maghreb-Machrek* 147 (Jan.–Mar. 1995): p. 105.
51. Censuses of 1994 and 2004, Central Bureau of Statistics, Damascus.
52. Interview in Baniyas in 2009 for work conducted on a project for the protection of the environment, GIZ and the Syrian Ministry for the Environment.
53. http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/05/07/uksyriaidUKTRE74222020110507; http://www.romandie.com/news/n/_Syrie_combats_inedits_en_pays_alalouite_sept_soldats_tues42020520131758.asp?n=_Syrie_combats_inedits_en_pays_alalouite_sept_soldats_tues42020520131758.asp
54. Author's interview, April–May 2011, Syria.
55. http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/13/syria-mass-executions-government-forces
56. A mixed Alawi–Armenian village in Jabal Ansariya where 150 were killed by rebels in August 2013.
57. An Alawi village near Homs where 50 were killed by rebels in January 2014.
58. Maher al-Asad is the youngest brother of Bashar al-Asad and his eventual successor in the event of the former's death.
59. Mustapha Tlass left Syria in 2011.
60. http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2012/03/01/le-lieutenant-tlass-figure-de-la-resistance-armee-de-baba-amro_1650436_3210.html
61. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/former-golden-boy-manaf-tlass-emerges-as-contender-to-lead-syria-7979680.html
62. Hizballah was forced to intervene in Syria on the order of Iran, which could not bring itself to see Bashar al-Asad's regime fall, since it was the linchpin of the pro-Iranian axis between Iran and the Mediterranean. Attacks by rebel forces against Shi'a villages in Homs triggered solidarity between the Shi'a on the other side of

the border and their Syrian brothers. The threats against the Shi'a shrine of Sayyida Zeinab were another pretext for intervention for Hizballah. The fear of being the next target should Bashar al-Asad fall was another argument put forward by Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of the Party. Retaking the town of Qusayr, Hizballah proved that it had a determining role to play in Syria, present at every major offensive from the Jordanian border to Aleppo.

63. By 2015, Iran had provided over 3 billion dollars to Asad's regime. Furthermore, Tehran sent over 30,000 tons of food and supplies to help the Syrian population suffering from the food crisis, http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.584566. The credit line provided by the Iranian government allowed Asad's regime to have access to oil and increase the value of the Syrian currency. The Iranian republic has also sent its own military chiefs to train Syrian militias. The Iranian government is providing intelligence and training to regime troops, http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.575593, and a rising number of Iranians have allegedly crossed the Syrian border to engage in the conflict. Furthermore, an elite faction of their own Revolutionary Guard is in charge of the Syrian affair, under the command of the powerful Qassem Souleimani, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?currentPage=all
64. Iraqi Shi'a flock to Asad's side as sectarian divisions widen: http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-iraq-syria-militants-idUSBRE95I0ZA20130619
65. The Syrian branch of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) which, having entered into a strategic alliance with the regime was promised the Kurdish territories in the north of Syria in exchange for its support against the rebels.
66. Although it contained approximately 10 percent of the Syrian population, the Alawi region accounted for more than 20 percent of jobs in the public industrial sector.
67. On 16 June 1979, a group of the Muslim Brotherhood stormed the Artillery School in Aleppo, singled out the Alawi cadets and massacred 83 of them.
68. Interview by the author, Tartus, October 2013.
69. The displacement and expulsion of millions of Sunni Syrian refugees to Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Kurdish Iraq was a crucial weapon in the regime's war strategy. They may potentially pose a threat as refugee combatants or provide insurgency bases across the border, yet such mass movements are difficult to reverse (or indeed repatriate), creating lasting demographic shifts which strengthen the regime's position. This broader strategy is being replicated in the forced displacement of communities and the subsequent urban destruction of entire Sunni neighbourhoods in Damascus and Homs. For more details, see: http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/30syria-thousands-houses-unlawfully-razed
70. April 2014: http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/01/us-syria-crisis-toll-idUSBREA300YX20140401
71. Other minorities traditionally and broadly loyal to the regime, including the Druze,

Christians, Isma'ilis and Shi'a, are also experiencing a similar demographic weakening; and now the combination of all minority confessions corresponds to no more than 20 percent of the current population, compared to around 30 percent in the early 1980s.

5. SYRIA'S ALAWIS AND THE BA'ATH PARTY

1. Alasdair Drysdale, 'Ethnicity in the Syrian Officer Corps: A Conceptualization', *Civilisations* 29 (1979): 359–74.
2. Anthony Smith, 'States and Homelands: the Social and Geopolitical Implications of National Territory', *Millennium* 10 (Autumn 1981): 187–202.
3. Peter Gubser, 'Minorities in Power: The Alawites of Syria', in R. D. McLaurin (ed.), *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East* (New York: Praeger, 1979), pp. 30–31.
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8. PATRONAGE AND CLIENTELISM IN BASHAR'S SOCIAL MARKET ECONOMY

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9. THE ALAWIS OF TRIPOLI: IDENTITY, VIOLENCE AND URBAN GEOPOLITICS

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22. Even today, Alawis have proportionally high numbers of mixed marriages, with 2,142 Alawi men taking 1,755 Sunni, 167 Shi'i, and Christian and Druze wives and 1,236 Alawi women marrying 718 Sunni, 398 Shi'i, as well as Christain and Druze husbands. These figures are the current mixed marriages registered in Lebanon cited by 'The Monthly', *Information International* 137 (Dec. 2013), p. 19.
23. In 1936 the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, granted a *fatwa* recognising Alawis as part of the Muslim community: 'According to those descriptions they are Muslims and the part of the Muslim community, have the same obligations and rights…and according to this we know that the Alawis are Muslims and the whole community should cooperate with them for good deeds and move away from the bad deeds.' Yvette Talhamy, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria', *Middle East Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2010), p. 186.
24. In total 88,278 persons were granted Lebanese nationality: over 42% were Syrian nationals compared to 36% stateless, 16% Palestinian and 6% from the rest of the world. President Suleiman in 2011 signed two decrees (6690 and 6691) which revoked Lebanese nationality from 176 people naturalised under the 1994 decree. See Guita Hourani,'The 1994 Naturalisation Decree', Emigration Research Centre, Notre Dame University, 2011, available online, eudo-citizenship.eu/docs/LEB-1994NaturalizationDecree GuitaHouraniNov2011.pdf
25. While this is difficult to verify statistically it was discussed by both Alawi and Sunni interviewees and supported by Alawi inter-marriage figures and Tripoli's electoral data 2009–2013—see footnote 22.
26. Authors' interview with an Alawi political representative, Tripoli, 18 December 2013.

27. See the Lebanese Elections Data Analysis (LEDA) browser which collects, visualises and analyses election-related data. The LEDA project is a joint effort of the Lebanese Association for Democracy of Elections (LADE) and Democracy International, based on data published by the Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), the Directorate General of Personal Services (DGPS), and the www.elections.gov.lb website.
28. Kawkab Ibrahim, 'Minorities in Lebanon: between loyalty and belonging the Alawis of Jabal Mohsen, a case study', Masters dissertation., Institute of Social Sciences, Lebanese University, 2013, p. 55. A similar trend is observed in Tripoli's Bab al-Tabbaneh district. According to a 2006 Council for Development and Reconstruction report, between 60 and 70 percent of Bab al-Tabbaneh's current residents emigrated in recent decades from the impoverished rural regions of Akkar, Dinnieh and Al-Minya. See 'Community conflict in Northern Lebanon', Partners for Democratic Change International (2013); See http://www.pdci-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/lebanon-assesment-report-16.10.pdf
29. *Sumud* is a form of resistance or steadfastness in the face of overwhelming power. For a more detailed explanation, see Craig Larkin, 'Jerusalem's Separation Wall and Global Message Board: Graffiti, Murals, and the Art of Sumud', *Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Spring 2014): pp. 134–69, pp. 136–7.
30. Fatima Reesha, 'Social and Cultural Changes in Tripoli, a study of the town of Jabal Mohsen', Master's Dissertation, Institute of Social Sciences, Lebanese University, 2002, p. 36.
31. Kawkab Ibrahim, 'Minorities in Lebanon', p. 54.
32. Authors' interview in Jabal Mohsen, 19 December 2013.
33. Authors' interview with an ADP official, Jabal Mohsen, 18 December 2013.
34. Known more disparagingly as the 'Pink Panthers', due to the improper laundering of their red camouflage fatigues. Robin Wright, 'Feared "Pink Panthers" prowl the battle-scarred streets of Beirut', *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 February 1982.
35. Authors' interview with Ali Fedda, Jabal Mohsen, 18 December 2013.
36. Augustus Norton, 'Lebanon after Ta'if: Is the Civil War over?' *Middle East Journal*, vol. 45, no. 3 (Summer 1991): p. 464.
37. Lebanese scholar Hanna Ziadeh refers to the Ta'if Accord as an 'internationally recognised Syrian communal containment policy' which 'supported and invited sectarian divisions to keep Lebanese communities weak and uncontrollable, which in turn legitimised Syria's continued right to rule'. *Sectarianism and Intercommunal Nation-Building in Lebanon* (London: Hurst, 2006), p. 149, p. 158.
38. Hilal Khashan, 'Lebanon's 1996 Controversial Parliamentary Elections', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Summer 1997): pp. 24–49.
39. Patrick Seale, *Asad: the Struggle for the Middle East*, 3rd edn (Los Angeles, CA: University of California, 1995), pp. 421–40.

40. Raphaël Lefèvre, 'Power Struggles Among the Alawites in Lebanon, Part I', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Middle East Centre, 1 January 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54058
41. Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Pax–Syriana? The origins, causes and consequences of Syria's role in Lebanon', *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 3 no. 1 (1998): pp. 137–60, 149.
42. Maren Milligan, 'Tripoli's troubles to come', *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, 13 August 2012, p. 2: http://www.merip.org/mero/mero081312
43. Authors' interview with Ali Fedda, Jabal Mohsen, 18 December 2013.
44. Ibid.
45. Nadi Elali, 'Sects and the City', *Nownews*, 11April 2013, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/specialreports/sects-and-the-city; MERIP
46. Author's interview with Lebanese academic, Nawaf Kabarra, Tripoli, 17 December 2013. An *An-Nahar* report in August 2005 also suggested that the Arab Knights were being reactivated by Rifaat al-Asad in co-ordination with ADP cadres. See Claude Salhani, 'Politics & Policies: Rifaat eyes return', *UPI*, 7 September 2005;http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2005/09/07/Politics-Policies-Rifaat-eyes-return/82041126109671/
47. See Carole Kerbage, 'The battles for "Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen": Banter and Barter, and Bullets', *al-Hayat*, 21 May 2013, http://arij.net/en/battles-%E2%80%9Cbab-tabbaneh%E2%80%9D-and-%E2%80%9Cjabal-mohsen%E2%80%9D-banter-and-barter-and-bullets
48. Maren Milligan, 'Tripoli's troubles to come', *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, 13 August 2012, p. 3.
49. Authors' interview with Alawi activist and lawyer, Arine al-Hassan, Tripoli, 18 December 2013.
50. 'Death Penalty Sought for Rifaat Eid, Jabal Mohsen Top Gunmen', *Naharnet*, 11 July 2014, http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/138500
51. Raphaël Lefèvre, 'Lebanon's Alawites at a Crossroads', Carnegie Middle East Centre, 21 May 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55663&reloadFlag=1
52. Samya Kullab, 'Jabal Mohsen leaderless and exposed, local say', *Daily Star*, 13 August 2014.
53. Authors' interview with Jihad al-Zayn, Beirut, 20 December 2013.
54. Scott Bollens, *City and Soul in Divided Societies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 13.
55. For a more detailed examination of Lebanese war memory and its effect on urban landscapes and collective imaginings see Craig Larkin, *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: remembering and forgetting the past* (Routledge: London and NY, January 2012) and Craig Larkin 'Remaking Beirut: Contesting Memory, Space and

the Urban Imaginary of Lebanese Youth', *City and Community*, Vol. 9, Issue 4, (Dec 2010): pp. 414–442.

56. An Amnesty International report estimated the death toll at 200, while local sources suggest that over 400 men were killed and others kidnapped. See Amnesty International's March 1987 report, http://www.dchrs.org/english/File/EnforcedDisappearances/1987MassacresBySyrianMilitary.pdf
57. Muhammad Abi Samra, 'Revenge of the Wretched: Islam and Violence in the Bab al Tabaneh Neighborhood of Tripoli', in Samir and Roseanne Saad Khalaf (eds), *Arab Youth: Social Mobilization in Times of Risk* (London: Saqi Books, 2011), pp. 220–35, 227.
58. See Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth, *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar and Nicosia* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); and previous work by Craig Larkin, *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: remembering and forgetting the past* (London and NY: Routledge, January 2012); and 'Remaking Beirut: Contesting Memory, Space and the Urban Imaginary of Lebanese Youth', *City and Community*, vol. 9, no. 4 (Dec. 2010): pp. 414–42.
59. Wendy Pullan, 'Spatial Discontinuities: Conflict Infastructures in Contested Cities', in Wendy Pullan and Britt Baillie (eds), *Locating Urban Conflicts: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Everyday* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 17–36, 32.
60. Authors' interview, Jabal Mohsen, 18 December 2013.
61. A civil activist quoted in Maren Milligan, 'Tripoli's troubles to come', p. 3.
62. Authors' interview with Shady Nashabe, Tripoli, 19 December 2013.
63. Elizabeth Picard, 'The Virtual Sovereignty of the Lebanese State: from Deviant Case to Ideal-type', in Laura Guazzone and Daniala Pioppi (eds), *The Arab State and Neo-liberal Globalization: the Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East* (Reading, Berks: Ithaca Press, 2009), p. 84.
64. Joseph Bahout, 'Lebanon at the Brink: The Impact of the Syrian Civil War', *Middle East Brief*, Brandeis University Crown Centre for Middle East Studies, 76, (Jan. 2014).
65. 'Tripoli sheikh accuses army, judiciary of conspiring with Iran', *Now Media*, 2 July 2013, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/tripoli-sheikh-accuses-army-judiciary-of-conspiring-with-iran
66. Martin Armstrong, 'Tripoli is Crying: Lebanon's Second City is on the Brink of Battle', *Vice News*, first accessed 3 June 2014, http://www.vice.com/print/i-dont-see-an-end-to-this-conflict-tripoli-is-crying-lebanons-second-city-is-on-the-brink
67. Elizabeth Picard; 'The Virtual Sovereignty of the Lebanese State: from Deviant Case to Ideal-type', p. 261.
68. Nadi Elali, 'Sects and the City'.
69. A number of these militia leaders have recently been imprisoned, yet it remains to

be seen if they are to be formally charged or granted an amnesty. Their supporters in Tripoli continue to mobilise weekly rallies and block roads in Bab al-Tabbaneh and Abi Samra. 'Islamic Gathering slams Tripoli detentions', *Daily Star*, 10 July 2014.

70. Carole Kerbage, 'The battles for "Bab Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen"'.
71. International Crisis Group, 'New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen', *Middle East Briefing Paper* 29, 14 October 2010, p. 9.
72. Ibid.
73. Mohamed Nazzal, 'Lebanon's Alawi: A Minority Struggles in a "Nation" of Sects', *al-Akhbar*, 8 November 2011, p. 4.
74. Authors' interview, Jabal Mohsen, 18 December 2013.
75. Mohamed Nazzal, 'Tripoli shoots itself in the Foot'.
76. Official quoted in Raphaël Lefèvre, 'Power Struggles Among the Alawites in Lebanon, Part II', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Middle East Centre, 2 January 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54060
77. Badr Wannous, 'The Minister that used to love Assad', *al-Mustaqbal*, 18 December 2013.
78. Ibid. and authors' interview with Badr Wannous MP, Tripoli, 18 December 2013.
79. Authors' interview with Arine Hassan, Tripoli, 18 December 2013.
80. For more on Hizballah's social services, see Dominique Avon and Anaïs-Trissa Khatchadourian, *Hezbollah, A History of the 'Party of God'* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 58–68; Melani Cammett, and Sukriti Issar, 'Bricks and mortar clientelism: sectarianism and the logics of welfare allocation in Lebanon', *World Politics*, vol. 62, no. 3 (2010): pp. 381–421; Mona Harb, *Faith-based organizations as effective development partners?Hezbollah and post-war reconstruction in Lebanon* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Dima Danawi, 'Hizballah's pulse: Into the dilemma of Al-Shahid and Jihad Al-Bina foundations', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2002.
81. International Crisis Group, 'New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen', p. 1.
82. Many Alawis interviewed concur with such an assessment. Arine Hassan suggests, 'all the politicians know that the conflict [in] Jabal Mohsen is the cheapest conflict in Lebanon'. Authors' interview in Tripoli, 18 December 2013. Tripoli should also be recognised as a less dangerous sparring arena than Beirut, which is more likely to lead to an internationalisation of the conflict.
83. Authors' interview, Balamand University, 18 December 2013.
84. Authors' interview, Jabal Mohsen, 18 December 2013.
85. 'Tripoli protests against Army measures in Arsal', *Daily Star*, 4 August 2014, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Aug-04/266026-tripoli-protest-against-army-measures-in-arsal.ashx#axzz3FSvALnEk

86. See Omri Nir, 'The Sunni-Shi'i Balance in Lebanon in light of the War in Syria and Regional change', *MERIA*, Rubin Centre Research in International Affairs, http://www.rubincenter.org/2014/04/the-sunni-shii-balance-in-lebanon-in-light-of-the-war-in-syria-and-regional-changes/
87. Sajjad Rizvi, 'Political mobilization and the Shi'i religious establishment (marja'iyya)', *International Affairs* 86: 6 (2010): pp. 1299–1313.
88. International Crisis Group, 'New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen', p. 8.
89. Hilal Khashan, 'Lebanon's Islamist Stronghold', *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2011): pp. 89.
90. Figures from 2011.
91. '*A Jebel Mohsen, la majorité allawite s'est plus que jamais rangé derrière un parti politique dont elle ne partage pas forcement les convictions, mais qui seul est capable de lui procurer une forme de protection*.' International Crisis Group, 'New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen', p. 2.
92. Susan Abd Al Salam Sabah, 'The origins of political conflict and its escalation, the example of Bab al Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen', Masters diss., Institute of Social Sciences, Lebanese University, 2009, p. 25.
93. Ibid.
94. Kawkab Ibrahim, 'Minorities in Lebanon: between loyalty and belonging, the Alawis of Jabal Mohsen, a case study', Masters Dissertation, Institute of Social Sciences, Lebanese University, 2013, p. 15. This is by no means a comprehensive survey, but given the lack of alternative data on Jabal Mohsen, it provides valuable insight into attitudes and social trends.
95. Ibid., p. 62.
96. Authors' interview with Arine Hassan, Tripoli, Lebanon, 18 December 2013.
97. A statement and conclusion drawn from numerous interviewees.
98. Lebanese former Prime Minister Nijab Miqati is quoted as having explored 'the possibility of the integration of these people [gang members and leaders] into the Internal Security Forces (ISF), just like with the militias after the civil war, especially since there is a new cycle to recruit 2,000 new members soon'. See 'Lebanon: Dangerous Proposal to Integrate Gangs into Security Forces', *al-Akhbar*, 23 November 2013, http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17684
99. Interview cited in Misbah al-Ali, 'Freedom still eludes Tripoli Militia chiefs', *Daily Star*, 19 July 2014.
100. Justin Salhani, 'Tripoli's terror duo: Mawlawi and Mansour', *Daily Star*, 3 October 2014, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Oct-03/272834-tripolis-terror-duo-mawlawi-and-mansour.ashx#axzz3FSvALnEk
101. Josh Wood, 'Lebanon sees success in fight against militants, yet risk of backlash remains' *The National*, 6 April 2015; http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-

east/lebanon-sees-success-in-fight-against-militants-yet-risk-of-backlash-remains#page1

102. 'Reports suggest ISIS behind north Lebanon suicide attack: interior minister' *The Daily Star*, 11 January 2015; http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Jan-11/283698-reports-suggest-isis-behind-north-lebanon-suicide-attack-interior-minister.ashx

10. CHASING GHOSTS: THE *SHABIHA* PHENOMENON

1. The number of active fighters in Syrian militias, rebel groups and army formations is notoriously hard to determine and any such figures—including those cited here—should be treated with great caution. The *New York Times* reported that a Syrian involved in government–militia coordination said that a total of 100,000 fighters had been trained for the National Defense Forces by early 2014. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a London-based security think tank, estimated the Syrian armed forces at 178,000 in 2013, down from 325,000 in 2009. Of the 178,000, some 50,000 were thought to be part of a handful of mainly Alawi elite divisions that play an outsized role in the fighting. For 2009, the report estimated that the Syrian government had access to 108,000 paramilitary fighters and gendarmes; but for 2013, IISS said it was 'unable at present to accurately estimate the strength of Syrian paramilitary forces, which have played a key role in the fighting'. 'Syria's diminished security forces', Associated Press/*Daily Star*, 28 August 2013, www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Aug-28/228953-syrias-diminished-security-forces.ashx#axzz35Pa7Jlek, accessed 23 June 2014; Anne Barnard, 'Muslim Shrine Stands as a Crossroads in Syria's Unrest', *New York Times*, 8 April 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/world/middleeast/muslim-shrine-stands-as-a-crossroads-in-syrias unrest.html, accessed 23 June 2014.
2. Nassima Neggaz, 'Syria's Arab spring: Language enrichment in the midst of revolution', *Language, Discourse and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2 (July 2013): 11–31.
3. Author's interview with 'Rabie', a Syrian pro-opposition activist, Skype, March 2013, edited for clarity and structure.
4. See, for example, Yassin al-Haj Salih, 'The Syrian Shabiha and Their State', Heinrich Böll Foundation, April 2012, www.lb.boell.org/web/52–801.html, accessed 7 June 2014.
5. Mohammad D., 'The Original Shabiha', *Syria Comment*, 17 August 2012, www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-original-shabiha-by-mohammad-d, last accessed 7 June 2014.
6. Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 4th rev. edn (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).
7. Mohammad D., 'The Original Shabiha'.
8. Ibid.

9. Yassin al-Haj Salih, 'The Syrian Shabiha and Their State'.
10. The government claimed that twelve people, including security personnel and two 'unidentified gunmen', were killed in Latakia on 26 March and a further 200 wounded. A database of conflict-related deaths in Syria run by the opposition-aligned Violations Documentation Center (VDC, available at http://www.vdc-sy.info, accessed 15 June 2014) lists 20 dead civilian 'martyrs' in Latakia between 25 and 27 March 2011, but no dead government soldiers or police.
11. The clip can still be viewed on '*ihtijajat suriya wal-shabbiha*' ('The Syrian protests and the Shabiha'), 27 March 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IgtFc5Pf20
12. Adrian Blomfield, 'Syria: power struggle behind failure to end emergency rule', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 March 2011.
13. Dominique Lagarde, '*Syrie: pourquoi Bachar el-Assad n'a pas levé l'état d'urgence*', *L'Express*, 30 March 2011.
14. '*sahifa britaniya: sira' fi arwiqat al-sulta al-souriya*' ('British newspaper: Struggle in the Syrian corridors of power'), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 30 March 2011, www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=614907&issueno=11810#.U4zGzy8zORs, accessed 15 June 2014. A search in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*'s online archive, which stretches back to the year 2000, reveals that the term had never been used before 30 March 2011. The next occurrence came on 8 April 2011, to be followed by another seven articles that month. In 2011, the word 'Shabiha' was used in a total of 132 articles in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, distributed as follows: January: 0, February: 0, March: 1, April: 8, May: 8, June: 8, July: 19, August: 16, September: 12, October: 13, November: 28, December: 19 (archive search made on 15 June 2014).
15. Tariq Alhomayed, '*souriya … nizam al-shabbiha*' (Syria …The Shabiha regime'), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 8 August 2011, www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=11941&article=634842#.U5JMai8zORs, last accessed 7 June 2014.
16. The Asad regime controlled a number of paramilitary groups and militias before the revolution, although most of these had declined since the 1980s, when they were employed to quell an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni Islamist opposition groups. The most prominent of these had historically been the Popular Army, a decades-old Ba'athist militia. It was estimated at 108,000 fighters by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in 2009, but there have been few if any reports of its activity during the current conflict. This suggests that the IISS estimate was far too high and that the Popular Army was at that point a mostly hollow force. In 2005, Lieutenant General Mohammad Ibrahim al-Ali, a veteran Ba'athist figure and former confidant of Hafez al-Asad who led the Popular Army for four decades, was relieved of duty after publicly criticising the Ba'ath Party leadership. One may speculate that this was one cause for the Popular Army's apparent decline and eventual disappearance. 'Syria's diminished security forces', Associated Press/*Daily Star*, Beirut, 28 August 2013, www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Aug-28/2289

53-syrias-diminished-security-forces.ashx#axzz35Pa7Jlek, accessed 23 June 2014; Imad Sara, '*dimashq: i'fa qaid al-jaish al-sha'abi bi-sabbab mutalabati-hi bi-hall qiyadat Septemberal-hizbSeptember*' ('Damascus: Removal of the leader of the Popular Army due to his demand for a dissolution of the Party leadership'), *al-Riyadh*, 2 June 2005, www.alriyadh.com/69298, accessed 2 July 2014.

17. 'Laying waste to humble Homs', *The Economist*, 21 July 2011, www.economist.com/node/18988896, accessed 15 June 2014.
18. Aziz Nakkash, 'The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity and the Making of a Community', Friedrich Ebert Foundation, March 2013.
19. 'Council decision 2011/273/CFSP of 9 May 2011 concerning restrictive measures against Syria', *Official Journal of the European Union*, 10 May 2011.
20. 'Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusrah Front Leaders, Militia Groups in Syria', US Department of the Treasury, 11 December 2012, iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2012/12/20121211139861.html#axzz2NMJBZEfl, accessed 8 June 2014.
21. Author's interview with 'Rabie', a Syrian pro-opposition activist, Skype, March 2013.
22. Asad appeared at Ummayad Square on 11 January 2012. The 'Shabiha' chant is clearly audible in video recordings of the event, for example those broadcast on Lebanon's al-Manar TV.
23. Abdullah Rija, '*salim idris li-'zaman al-wasl': al-hall bi-istiqalat jama'iyya wa-wazir al-difa' lam yurashshih li-mansibi-hi qanouniyan*', *Zaman al-Wasl*, 18 March 2014, https://zamanalwsl.net/news/47724.html, accessed 17 June 2014.
24. For example, in May 2013 a propaganda video was published by the Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement, a Sunni Islamist group, showing what was claimed to be 'daily' rocket fire against—among other things—Qardaha, the hometown of the Asad family. ('*bromo al-thar li-majzarat baniyas dakk ma'aqil al-shabbiha fil-qardaha*', video published online on 13 May 2013, Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement, www.ahraralsham.net/?p=1408, accessed 17 June 2014.) The Free Syrian Army-aligned Farouq Battalions have distributed a propaganda video allegedly showing mortar fire into the Alawi village of Kafrnan in the Hama province in January 2013. www.youtube.com/watch?v=njzwAmeINUQ, accessed 15 June 2014.
25. Martin Chulov and Mona Mahmood, 'Syrian Sunnis fear Assad regime wants to "ethnically cleanse" Alawite heartland', *Guardian*, 22 July 2013, www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/22/syria-sunnis-fear-alawite-ethnic-cleansing, accessed 17 June 2014.
26. Alawis and Druze consider themselves part of a broader Shi'a Muslim tradition, but I am here using the word 'Shi'a' to refer to so-called 'Imami' or 'Twelver' Shiism. It is the largest branch of Shi'a Islam globally, but a very small minority in Syria. Syrian Imami Shi'a are concentrated in Damascus and the Quseir region south of Homs, and in a handful of isolated towns, including Kafraya and Fouaa (Idleb), Nubul and Zahra (Aleppo), and Bosra al-Sham (Dar'a). There was also a

small Shi'a convert community in Hatla in Deir al-Zor province, but it appears to have been wiped out by Sunni rebels in June 2013. 'Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic', United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/24/26, 16 August 2013.

27. Hussam Mohammed, '*niran al-iqtital al-shi'i—al-sunni tahruq aqdam madina athariya fi dar'a ... bosra al-sham*' ('The fires of Sunni–Shiite infighting burn the oldest archeological city in Dar'a ... Bosra al-Sham'), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 29 April 2014, www.alquds.co.uk/?p=162345, accessed 17 June 2014; also interviews with officials from a country which closely monitors the Syrian conflict.
28. Sam Dagher, 'Syrian Conflict Draws In Christians', *Wall Street Journal*, 23 July 2012, online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303644004577524653025270434.html, accessed 17 June 2014.
29. Firas Choufi, 'The SSNP "Hurricane" in the Syrian Conflict: Syria and South Lebanon are the Same Battlefield', 3 February 2014, *al-Akhbar*, www.english.al-akhbar.com/node/18502, accessed 15 June 2014.
30. For example, Jihad al-Zein, '*masihiya muqatila fi souriya*' ('A Fighting Christianity in Syria'), *al Nahar*, 8 March 2014.
31. International Crisis Group, 'Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria', *Middle East Report* 151, 8 May 2014. I am also greatly indebted to conversations with Carl Drott, a Swedish journalist who has travelled in the Qamishli region and reported on local politics and Kurdish–Syriac relations.
32. For example, 'Syrian Coalition Declares PYD an Enemy of the Syrian Revolution', National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary Forces and Opposition Forces, 4 January 2014, www.en.etilaf.org/news/syrian-coalition-declares-pyd-an-enemy-of-the-syrian-revolution.html, accessed 17 June 2014; 'PYD leader: Turkey continues to support al-Nusra Front against Kurds', *Today's Zaman*, 4 August 2013, www.todayszaman.com/news-322769-pyd-leader-turkey-continues-to-support-al-nusra-front-against-kurds.html, accessed 17 June 2014.
33. Author's interviews with Sheruan Hassan, PYD foreign affairs spokesperson, The Hague, Netherlands, April 2013; and Saleh Muslim Mohammed, PYD co-chairman, Stockholm, Sweden, February 2014.
34. Andrea Glioti, 'Syrian Kurds recruit regime loyalists to fight jihadists', *Syria Pulse—Al Monitor*, 13 February 2014, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/pyd-kurds-syria-regime-assad-autonomy.html, accessed 23 June 2014; Carl Drott, 'Qamishli's cold war', *Le Monde diplomatique*, November 2013, mondediplo.com/blogs/qamishli-s-cold-war, accessed 23 June 2014; idem, 'Arab Tribes Split Between Kurds and Jihadists', *Syria in Crisis*, 5 May 2014, www.carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55607, accessed 23 June 2014. I would also like to thank Carl Drott for information on these matters provided in personal conversations.
35. Carl Drott, 'Qamishli's cold war'; idem, 'A Christian Militia Splits in Qamishli', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6 March 2014, www.

carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54794, accessed 23 June 2014; idem, 'Syriac–Kurdish Cooperation in Northeast Syria', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 March 2014, www.carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54797, accessed 23 June 2014.

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37. Videos are available via Eliot Higgins, 'Aleppo—Zaino Berri, Shabiha Leader, Captured and Executed', *Brown Moses*, 31 July 2012, brown-moses.blogspot.se/2012/07/aleppo-zaino-berri-shabiha-leader.html, accessed 17 June 2014; '*istishhad zeino berri bi-halab wa-isabat 'odw madjlis el-sha'b hassan sha'ban berry*' ('Zeino Berri is martyred in Aleppo and the Member of the People's Council Hassan Shaaban Berri is wounded'), *Cham Times*, 1 August 2012, www.chamtimes.com/130545.html, accessed 17 June 2014.
38. The Ba'ath Party's total membership in Syria rose from 1,815,597 members to 2,428,847 members between the 9th and 10th Regional Congresses in the years 2000 and 2005. Of the 2005 members, 547,488 were *'amilin*, i.e. full party cadres, while the remaining 1,881,359 were so-called *ansar* members, who have yet to graduate to full membership and electability for decision-making organs. See General Secretariat of the National Command of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party, '*harakat al-ba'th al-mutajaddida': 38 'amman 'ala al-tashih—dirasa tahliliya wahatiqiya* ('The Renewing Ba'ath Movement: 38 Years of Correction. An Analytical and Documentary Study'), Special Publications Series 1 (Nov. 2008), p. 38.
39. Naser al-Sharara, '*al-assad yaqoum bi-inqilab abyad*' ('Asad carries out a bloodless coup'), *Syria Steps*, 19 July 2013, www.syriasteps.com/index.php?d=110&id=107434, accessed 17 June 2014.
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42. Aziz Nakkash, 'The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity and the Making of a Community'; Omar al-Sheikh, '*musallihou al-dawla: al-jaish al-radif*' ('The armed men of the state: The auxiliary army'), *al-Akhbar*, 23 October 2013, www.al-akhbar.com/node/193595
43. Marah Mashi, 'People's Committees in Syria: Patrolling Local Borders', *al-Akhbar*, 4 September 2012, www.english.al-akhbar.com/node/11740, accessed 8 June 2014.

44. Aziz Nakkash, 'The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity and the Making of a Community'.
45. Marah Mashi, 'People's Committees in Syria: Patrolling Local Borders'.
46. 'President al-Assad gives interview to the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper', *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 18 June 2013, www.sana.sy/eng/21/2013/06/18/487994.htm, accessed 17 June 2014.
47. Babak Dehghanpisheh, 'Elite Iranian unit's commander says his forces are in Syria', *Washington Post*, 16 September 2012, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/elite-iranian-units-commander-says-his-forces-are-in-syria/2012/09/16/431ff096–0028–11e2-b257 e1c2b3548a4a_story.html, accessed 17 June 2014.
48. 'Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training', Reuters, 4 April 2013, www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/04/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404, accessed 17 June 2014; 'Insight: Battered by war, Syrian army creates its own replacement', Reuters, 21 April 2013, www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/21/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421, accessed 17 June 2014.
49. Nassour has since been replaced by Lieutenant General Bassam al-Hassan, a Damascus-based military advisor to President Bashar al-Asad.
50. A prominent example of a civilian NDF leader was Bashar al-Asad's cousin, Hilal al-Assad. He was part of the 'original' *Shabiha* smuggling groups in the 1980s, but after the decline of the smuggling market he moved into the real estate business. He was director of the Military Housing Company in Latakia when the conflict began in 2011, but then began to build an armed movement that later developed into the Latakia NDF branch. Hilal al-Asad was killed in March 2014. Author's interview with Mohammad D., June 2014; Mohammad D., 'Who Was Hilal al-Assad? By Mohammad D.', *Syria Comment*, 5 April 2014, www.joshualandis.com/blog/hilal-al-assad-mohammad-d, accessed 8 June 2014.
51. Aron Lund, 'The Ba'ath Battalions Move Into Damascus', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 January 2014, www.carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54167, accessed 17 June 2014.
52. Omar al-Sheikh, '*musallihou al-dawla: al-jaish al-radif*' ('The armed men of the state: The auxiliary army).
53. Edward Dark, 'Pro-regime Sunni fighters in Aleppo defy sectarian narrative', *Al-Monitor*, 14 March 2014, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/syria-aleppo-sunni-quds-baath-brigades.html, accessed 17 June 2014.
54. '*kataib al-ba'th ila shawari' dimashq*' ('The Ba'ath Battalions to the streets of Damascus'), *al-Akhbar*, 30 December 2013, www.al-akhbar.com/node/197848, accessed 17 June 2014.
55. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'Aymenn al-Tamimi Speaks to Ali Kayali and Profiles the Syrian Resistance, a Pro-Assad Militia Force', *Syria Comment*, 22 September 2013, www.joshualandis.com/blog/aymenn-al-tamimi-speaks-to-ali-kayali-and-profiles-the-syrian-resistance-a-pro-assad-militia-force, accessed 17 June 2014.

56. Mihrac Ural entered politics through Turkey's radical Marxist–Leninist movement, as leader of a small splinter faction of the illegal Turkish People's Liberation Party/Front (the THKP/C–Acilciler). After escaping to Syria in the 1980s, he took up Syrian nationalism and began working for the reattachment of 'Liwa Iskanderoun' (the Hatay Province of Turkey) to Syria. His Syrian Resistance faction also calls itself the Popular Front for the Liberation of Liwa Iskanderoun. See Stephen Starr, 'The Renewed Threat of Terrorism to Turkey', *CTC Sentinel*, 25 June 2013, www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-renewed-threat-of-terrorism-to-turkey, accessed 17 June 2014.
57. Marah Mashi, 'Syria: Secularism Takes a Backseat in Latakia', *al-Akhbar*, 11 May 2013, www.english.al-akhbar.com/node/15770, accessed 8 June 2014.
58. The Iranian authorities mainly appear to work through proxies like Hizballah (Lebanon) and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (Iraq), but the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps is also reported to be recruiting fighters for Syria among Afghan Shi'a refugees in Iran, paying each fighter a $500 monthly salary and promising residency status in Iran, and to have sent its own members to Syria in training, advisory, and intelligence roles, backed up by Iranian volunteer fighters. Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, 'Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad', Reuters, 21 February 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221, accessed 17 June 2014; Martin Chulov, 'Controlled by Iran, the deadly militia recruiting Iraq's men to die in Syria', *Guardian*, 12 March 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/12/iraq-battle-dead-valley-peace-syria, accessed 17 June 2014; Farnaz Fassihi, 'Iran Pays Afghans to Fight for Assad', *Wall Street Journal*, 22 May 2014, www.online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304908304579564161508613846, accessed 17 June 2014.
59. Omar al-Jaffal, 'Iraqi Shiites join Syria war', *Al-Monitor*, 29 October 2012, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/iraqi-shiites-join-syrian-war.html#, accessed 15 June 2014; Christopher Anzalone, 'Zaynab's Guardians: The Emergence of Shi'a Militias in Syria', *CTC Sentinel*, 2 July 2013, nhttps://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zaynabs-guardians-the-emergence-of-Shi'a-militias-i syria, accessed 15 June 2014. See also the many articles of Phillip Smyth for *Jihadology*, collected at http://jihadology.net/hizballah-cavalcade, accessed 15 June 2014.
60. Ibid.
61. Phillip Smyth, 'Hizballah Cavalcade: The Badr Organization's Syrian Expeditionary Force: Quwet al-Shahid Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr', *Jihadology*, 18 October 2014, www.jihadology.net/2013/10/18/hizballah-cavalcade-the-badr-organizations-syrian-expeditionary-force-quwet-al-shahid-muhammed-baqir-al-sadr, accessed 7 June 2014.
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63. 'Sayyed Nasrallah: Takfiris, Israelis Are Existential Threats to Lebanon', *al-Manar*,

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64. International Crisis Group, 'Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria', *Middle East Report* 153, 27 May 2014, www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/lebanon/153-lebanon-s-hizbollah-turns-eastward-to-syria.aspx, accessed 8 June 2014.
65. Rana Harbi, 'Arab nationalists take up arms in the battle for Syria', *al-Akhbar*, 5 May 2014, www.english.al-akhbar.com/node/19649, accessed 17 June 2014.
66. Firas Choufi, 'The SSNP 'Hurricane' in 'The Syrian Conflict: Syria and South Lebanon Are the Same Battlefield', *al-Akhbar*, 3 February 2014, www.english.al-akhbar.com/node/18502, accessed 15 June 2014.
67. The PFLP–GC broke off from the PFLP, an independent Marxist–Leninist faction, in 1968. It remains under the leadership of its founder, Ahmed Jibril, espousing no clear ideology except armed resistance against Israel and support for the Syrian and Iranian 'resistance axis'. al-Sa'iqa, which is also known as the Vanguards of the Popular War of Liberation, was created with direct Syrian government support in 1966, to serve as an armed wing of the Palestinian branch of the Ba'ath Party. Fath al-Intifada was created in Lebanon in 1983, following a Syrian-backed military revolt within Yasir Arafat's mainstream Fatah Movement. All three groups were deeply involved in the Lebanese civil war of 1975–90, assisting Syrian government forces even against other Palestinian factions. By the time the Syrian conflict began, they were all in decline and only the PFLP–GC seemed to retain a significant armed organisation. In early 2011, the PFLP–GC consequently took a leading role in organising pro-Asad Palestinian militias, while al-Sa'iqa's role was very limited. Fath al-Intifada's armed activity also seems minimal, but it has reported the 'martyrdom' of several members in Syria during the current conflict. See Palestinian Media and Studies Center, '*fath al-intifada tan'i shuhadaha alladhina istashadou difa'an 'an al-mukhayyamat al-filastiniyya fi souriya*' ('Fath al-Intifada mourns its martyrs who fell defending the Palestinian camps in Syria'), *Fath al-Intifada*, 13 May 2014, www.palestine-msc.com/?p=2972, accessed 22 June 2014.
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69. Aryn Baker, 'Syria's Assad May Be Losing Control Over His Deadly Militias', *Time*, 11 September 2013, www.world.time.com/2013/09/11/syrias-assad-may-be-losing-control-over-his-deadly-militias, accessed 8 June 2014.
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19 June 2012, www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/19/homs-sunni-markets_n_1608009.html, accessed 8 June 2014.

71. An Asaib Ahl al-Haqq spokesperson was quoted as saying his group 'has withdrawn from Syria and returned to Iraq'. Alissa J. Rubin and Rod Nordland, 'Seeing Their Gains at Risk, Shiites Flock to Join Militias', *New York Times*, 13 June 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/06/14/world/middleeast/shiites-flock-to-join-militias-to-battle-Sunnis-who-are-driving-toward-Baghdad.html?hp&_r=0, accessed 14 June 2014; 'Iraqi Shi'ite fighters in Syria head home to fight ISIL', Reuters, 18 June 2014.
72. For example: '*ajlasou-hu wa-'anasiru-hu 'jathiyan'...'shabbiha' yasluboun dabit amn silaha-hu bi-sabbab mushkila 'ala 'dawr al-khubz' fi halab*!' ('They forced him and his men to kneel... the 'Shabiha' strips a security officer of his arms because of a problem in the bread line in Aleppo!'), *Aks al-Sir*, 1 August 2013, www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=093c2fb2290020126ac9600ec0bf8683&ar=236813928, accessed 8 June 2014.
73. Sara Abdelhay, '*hal bada al-sharkh bayna al-kutlatayn...jaramana bain rassas al-lijan al-sha'biya wa-ajhizat al-amn*' ('Has a rift opened between the blocs?...Jaramana between the bullets of the Popular Committees and the security services'), *Zaman al-Wasl*, 19 July 2013, https://zamanalwsl.net/readNews.php?id=39821, accessed 8 June 2014; '*hamlat i'tiqalat tutal al-ruous al-kabira li-shabbihat jeremana al-durouz*' ('Big leaders of the Druze Shabiha in Jeremana touched by a campaign of arrests'), *Kulluna Shuraka*, 23 July 2013, www.all4syria.info/Archive/90400, accessed 8 June 2014; '*ba'd an tahawwalou ila mafiyat ... nizam al-assad yaqbud fi jaramane wa-yastabdulu-hum bi-shabbiha 'ahdath*'!' ('After they transformed into mafias... The Asad regime cracks down in Jeremane and replaces them with 'more modern' Shabiha!'), *Aks al-Sir*, 24 July 2013, www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=a51df0a1756b401d03d70328e985208a&ar=62885495, accessed 8 June 2014; Nadhir Rida, '*al-miat min 'anaser milishiyat 'al-lijan al-sha'biya' yatamarridoun didd quwat al-assad*' ('Hundreds of members of the "Popular Committees" militias rebel against Asad's forces'), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 6 August 2013, www.classic.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=739105&issueno=12670#.U4yOuC8zORs, accessed 8 June 2014.
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75. Lauren Williams, 'Fighting among pro-Assad groups points to factional future', *Daily Star*, Beirut, 17 May 2014, www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/May–17/256755-fighting-among-pro-assad-groups-points-to-factional-future.ashx#axzz339JH4g8S, accessed 22 June 2014.
76. Remarks delivered at 'Pitfalls and Promises: Security Implications of a Post-Revolutionary Middle East', an academic conference hosted by the Canadian Secu-

rity Intelligence Service (CSIS) in Ottawa, 12–13 May 2014. The conference was held under Chatham House rules, so I am not at liberty to disclose the identity of the speaker.

77. Kheder Khaddour, 'Securing the Syrian Regime', *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 June 2014, www.carnegieendowment.org/sada/2014/06/03/securing-syrian-regime/hcg3, accessed 7 June 2014.
78. This Chapter was first written in early 2014. In late 2014 and early 2015, the position of the Asad government appeared to be weakening due to financial difficulties, manpower constraints, and diminishing foreign support, as well as increasing cohesion among anti-government groups. Starting in March 2015, the government suffered several significant military setbacks.

11. AlAWIS IN THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION

1. Muhallab Hassan, a dentist from Tartus, was killed in 1986 for intending to do exactly that. In his writings, he proposed the formation of an elected body of Alawi notables (*mashayekh*) to represent the community and promote its integration into Syrian society. See Habib Abu Zarr, 'Die Geiseln des Lowen: Warum das Haus Assad den Hass auf die Alawiten schurte und warum es nichts mehr furchten muss als deren Erwachen', *Zenith* 4 (2013): 20.
2. According to estimates from Islamic sources in 2004, within the preceding fifteen years US$ 1.5 billion had been poured into Syria, Jordan and Lebanon to promote Wahhabism. See Carsten Wieland, *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2012), p. 214.
3. 'Suspects into Collaborators: Peter Neumann argues that Assad has himself to blame', in: London Review of Books, 3 April 2014.
4. Aron Lund: 'Say Hello to the Islamic Front', Carnegie Endowment, 22 Nov. 2013 (carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53679); Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan: ISIS Inside the Army of Terror, (New York, 2015).
5. *Al-Safir*, 15 March 2003.
6. On details about the composition of the peasantry and their role in Syrian politics, see Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry: The Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
7. Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 31.
8. It became commonplace for a general, for example, to be considered or bestowed the title 'sheikh', such as Mohammed Naseef, the Alawite assistant of today's sidelined Sunni Vice President Faruq al-Shara'.
9. Habib Abu Zarr, 'Die Geiseln des Löwen: Warum das Haus Assad den Hass auf die Alawiten schürte und warum es nichts mehr fürchten muss als deren Erwachen', *Zenith* 4 (2013).

10. The National Progressive Front, established in 1972, was a coalition of political parties in Syria that support the socialist and Arab nationalist orientation of the government and accept the 'leading role in society' of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party.
11. According to the main initiator of the declaration, Michel Kilo, and the author's interviews with other participants of the Damascus Spring including Amal and Mouaffaq Nyraina, Berlin, 10 and 11 October 2013.
12. Dalila was later released from prison by presidential pardon on 7 August 2008.
13. An excellent account of the political and sectarian discourses during the rise of the Ba'ath Party can be found in Nikolaos Van Dam: *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).
14. Lobmeyer (1995), pp. 211, 219ff; Batatu (1999), pp. 227–9, 327; Perthes (1990), p. 16; Perthes, *Orient* (1990); Van Dam (2011).
15. Habib Abu Zarr, 'Die Geiseln des Löwen: Warum das Haus Assad den Hass auf die Alawiten schürte und warum es nichts mehr fürchten muss als deren Erwachen', *Zenith* 4 (2013).
16. Ibid., p. 21.
17. Ibid., p. 25.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Salwa Ismail, 'The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 11, no. 3 (Dec. 2011).
21. Author's interview with Amal Nyrabia, 10 October 2013, Berlin.
22. Al Jazeera, 25 April 2011.
23. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 December 2011; statement published in German on www.inamo.de 15 December 2011.
24. Ibid.
25. Author's interview with Amal Nyrabia, Berlin, 10 October 2013.
26. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 December 2011; statement published in German on www.inamo.de 15 December 2011.
27. Some Alawis have made reference to the short-lived Alawite state of Latakia (*Dawlat Jabal al-'Alawiyin*) founded in 1922 under the French Mandate. In a strategy of divide-and-rule the French had granted the Alawis a state of their own as a reward of their political support.
28. Darwish was awarded the PEN Pinter Award 2014 alongside Salman Rushdie. In an acceptance letter, 'My plea for Syria', from his prison cell he explains: 'There is not a single prison in Syria today without one of my friends inside it, nor is there a cemetery in Syria today that doesn't contain the remains of one of them. The fear of complicating things for them and their loved ones has etched their names on to my soul. Some people in Syria still believe that firing weapons will save them; for others, the fear of democracy is greater than the hatred of dictatorship. To those

fools I say: Stop. You can't kill an idea by killing people. My dear friends, sects and dictatorship have divided our people for a long time now, but faith unites them. And so to all those who believe in a better tomorrow for Syria and for the whole world, I say that this is not the end of history, but rather the beginning of an era in which humanity is rid of the scourge of tyranny and terrorism.' *Guardian*, Comment is Free, 10 October 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/10/pen-pinter-prizewinner-mazen-darwish-plea-syria

29. Ibid; 'Fadwa Suleiman: Actress And Alawite Icon Of Syrian Revolt Warns Of Sectarian Violence', by Amrutha Gayathri, in: *International Business Times*, 31 March 2012 (http://www.ibtimes.com/fadwa-suleiman-actress-alawite-icon-syrian-revolt-warns-sectarian-violence-432426).
30. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auHoFV9jvNk, uploaded 23 November 2011.
31. 'Syrian actress treads new stage in Syrian protests', Khaled Yacoub Oweis, Reuters, 5 January 2012.
32. Khaled Yacoub Oweis, Reuters, 6 May 2011.
33. For more details on the escalation of violence and protest in Hama see 'Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic', UN General Assembly, 15 September 2011,http://www.ohchr.org/documents/countries/sy/syria_report_2011–08–17.pdf
34. '"You Can Still See Their Blood": Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside', Human Rights Watch, 11 October 2013.
35. The Party is part of the Peaceful Change Forces. Further members are the Public Will Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Third Movement for Syria, the Democratic Marxist Assembly and the National Work Movement.
36. Karen Leukefeld, 'Zaghafter Wandel', *Junge Welt*, 7 May 2012, http://www.agfriedensforschung.de/regionen/Syrien/wahl3.html
37. Jean Leca refers to an 'institutional opposition', tolerated by authoritarian regimes in the Middle East as they are inherently divided and servile. Jean Leca, 'Opposition in the MENA', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2007): 557–77.
38. 'Louay Hussein, mainstay of Syria opposition, flees to Turkey', in: Financial Times, 29 April 2015 (http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4a223334-eda8-11e4-987e-00144feab7de.html).
39. Omayma Abdel-Latif, 'Going it alone', *al-Ahram Online* no. 789, 6–12 April 2006, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/789/re4.htm
40. '*Chroniques du délitement: Règlement de comptes à Qardaha, antre de la famille Al Assad*', *Le Monde*, 1 October 2012, http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2012/10/01/chroniques-du-delitement-2-reglement-de-comptes-a-qardaha-antre-de-la-famille-al-assad/; and Joshua Landis' blog entry on www.syriacomment.com refer-

ring to the *Le Monde* article on 2 October 2012: http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-families-of-qardaha-Hizballah-fighters-killed-in-syria-irans-currency-collapses-from-sanctions/On Khayyer's political views see 'Syria in travail: Interview with Abdulaziz al-Khair', NCB website, 16 May 2012, http://syrianncb.org/2012/05/17/syria-in-travail-interview-with-abdulaziz-al-khair/

41. Syrian Revolution Alawites, *al-Hayat*, 16 March 2013.
42. The National Democratic Assembly (NDA). In late 1979, the National Democratic Assembly (NDA, *al tajammou al-watani al-dimouqrati*) was created as a coalition of Arab nationalist and leftist parties, but was swiftly suppressed in a 1980 crackdown. While largely ineffectual thereafter, it remained the primary framework for secular opposition until the Bashar era. The NDA is currently led by Hassan Abdelazim, and contains six parties, most of them based mainly inside Syria. Although very weak, the NDA has considerable experience and international contacts, and it is the most important bloc of 'traditional' opposition groups inside Syria. Abdelazim's own Democratic Arab Socialist Union (DASU) and the Syrian Democratic People's Party (SDPP) created by Riad al-Turk are by far the most important parties in the NDA. See Aron Lund, 'Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions', Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Olof Palme International Center, Uppsala, May 2012.
43. The National Bloc is a faction of the Syrian National Council comprised of non-partisan dissidents from all backgrounds, although Sunni conservatives predominate. It calls for a pluralistic, independent, free and civil state. See www.carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48358
44. For a very good overview on the opposition parties and groupings, see Aron Lund, 'Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions'.
45. Dr Jalal Nofal, specialist in psychiatry in the Red Crescent hospital in Damascus and politician of the Communist Labour Party, was arrested on 9 May 2011 for the first time during the revolution because of his participation in a demonstration in Damascus Arnous Square. He was arrested for a third time on 22 April 2012 (he had already served a ten-year prison sentence): http://all4syria.info/Archive/47163?wpmp_tp=1&wpmp_switcher=deskt
46. *The Syrian Observer*, 19 June 2013.
47. 'Two Syrian diplomats defect in Berlin', *Middle East Monitor*, 28 June 2013: www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/europe/6415-two-syrian-diplomats-defect-in-berlin-#sthash.qA0aajf7.dpuf; Lama Ahmad Iskandar defection statement; author's interview with Lama Ahmad Iskandar, Berlin, 2 October 2013.
48. 'Exclusive: Former Syria defence minister defects in break with Assad', Reuters, 4 September 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/04/us-syria-crisis-defection-idUSBRE9830O420130904; 'Syrian defector General Ali Habib reaches Istanbul', Reuters, 5 September 2013: http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/09/05/syria-crisis-defection-ali-habib-idINDEE98409S20130905

49. Aron Lund, 'Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions'.
50. 'Syrian leader's uncle calls for him to step down', Reuters, 17 November 2011, http://af.reuters.com/article/libyaNews/idAFL5E7MH4AU20111117
51. Author's interview with Ali Dayoub, Berlin, 23 October 2013.
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